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By McKay Coppins

CAN THE PENTAGON
WEAPONIZE THE BRAIN?

Teacher, Therapist, Parent, Spy

What [Alexa](#) is doing to us



BY JUDITH SHULEVITZ

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Paul McCartney

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The Science of
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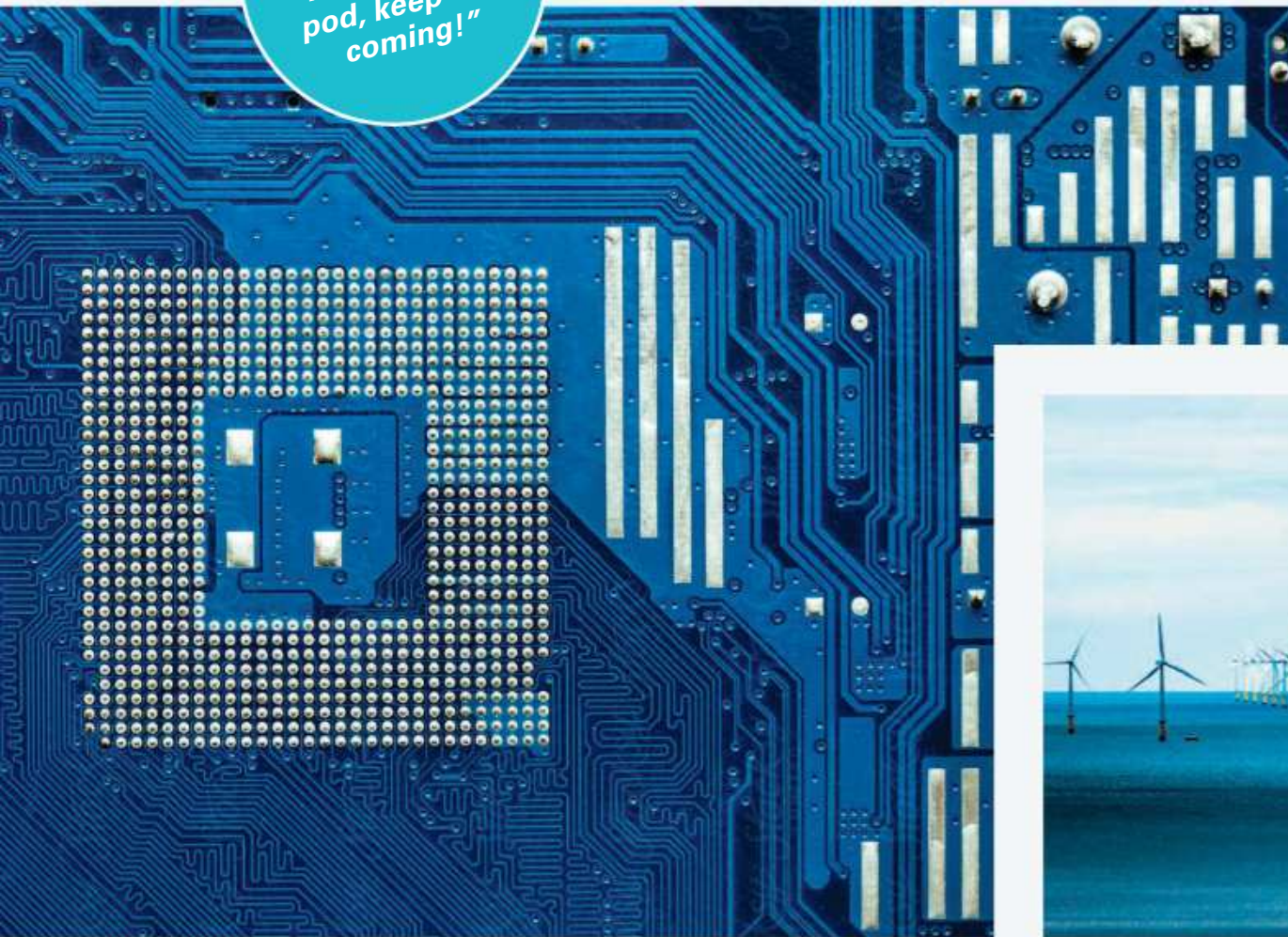
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HAT KIND OF

energy will power our homes in the future? How

can we try to curb outbreaks of infectious disease? These are some of the questions being

asked by the world's leading scientists, engineers, and technologists as they attempt to revolutionize fields like health care and renewable energy.

This season on *The Future According To Now*, we're exploring the frontier of technology. For everyday investors, staying current on this dynamic industry to identify the next big winner can be difficult, if not impossible. We'll speak to Fidelity experts who look beyond the major tech titans into these emerging technologies to identify the next wave of potential investment opportunities.

We'll also hear from those pushing the boundaries of innovation—from the adoption of Big Data, machine learning, and AI in health care to the advancements in engineering that have enabled wind energy to move into previously uncharted ocean depths. But the impact of these innovations reaches far beyond their respective fields. With the help of industry specialists, we go on the ground—and out to sea—to reveal the technologies that promise to profoundly shape our lives, and potentially the investment space, in the near future. ■

EPISODE SPOTLIGHT



9

Big Data Is Spreading

15 minutes, 22 seconds

From the way we build our cities to how we grow our food and educate our children, Big Data is changing every facet of modern life. As this technology evolves, so does its potential for solving global problems such as the spread of infectious disease. Pioneers in the field of health care believe that Big Data can be used to simplify and add life-saving efficiency to our medical system as well as address some of the industry's most pressing issues, including disease prevention. In this episode we speak with technologists using patient data to track the spread outbreaks of infectious disease, as well as an investment specialist on potential opportunities.

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OF NO PARTY OR CLIQUE

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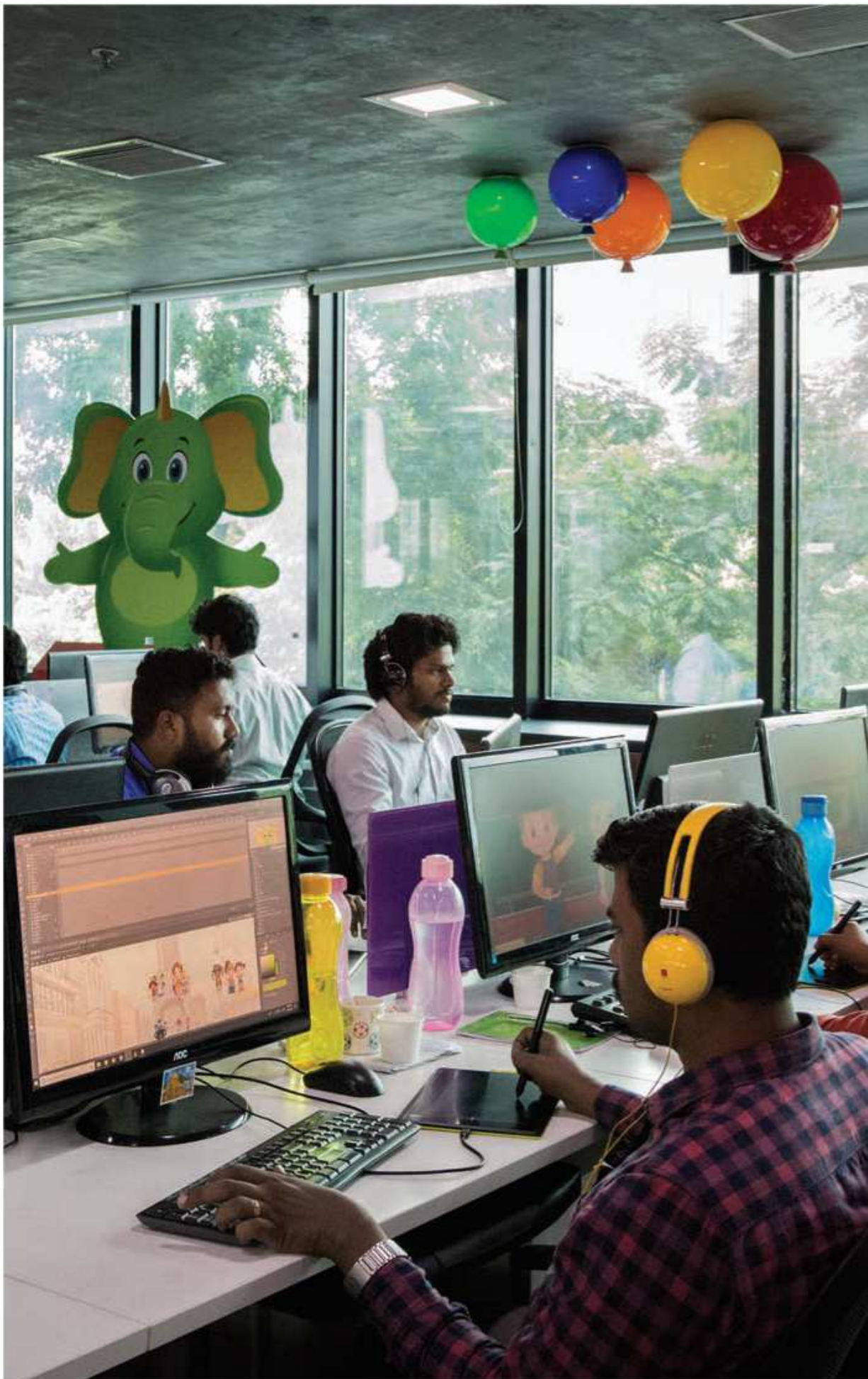
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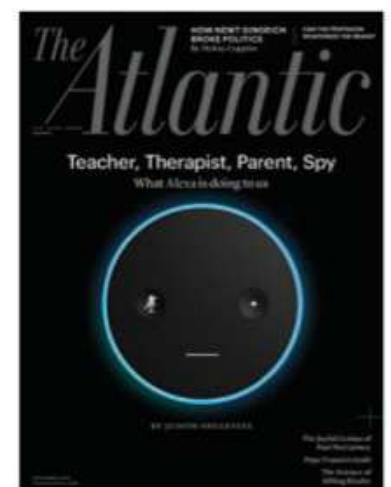
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On the Cover



Mendelsund/Munday

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CAPTURE TOMORROW



*The Culture File***34** THE OMNIVORE**The Eternal Sunshine of Paul McCartney**

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The iconoclastic author, whose six-volume *My Struggle* is now complete in English, has lost his faith in radical self-exposure. What happened?



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• THE CONVERSATION

May It Please the Court

In September, Lara Bazelon drew on her experience as a trial lawyer to examine the cultural bias that runs deep in courtrooms, where, she argued, male attorneys rely on tactics that are off-limits to women.

I am one of the women quoted in Lara Bazelon's article about how gender affects courtroom trial work.

I agonized for years over whether to report the incident in which the judge assaulted me—mostly because I was, and still am, concerned that doing so would harm my clients. As a public defender, I take my role as a zealous advocate seriously, and am fully aware that the benefits and harms of reporting are more likely to fall on

my clients rather than me. The stakes for my clients—oftentimes years of their life—are high. This makes deciding what is too much a profoundly difficult call.

Here's the other problematic part. It took me a very long time to decide to come forward. But I did, and I filed a formal complaint in 2016 with the group that is responsible for complaints against judges. My complaint detailed what happened, and who else was in the room. It

was not a complicated factual scenario. More than a year and a half has passed since I filed the complaint, and it is still pending. The judge is still on the bench, still hearing cases. Still in a position to affect my clients.

Not only was there tremendous pressure to stay quiet in order to protect my clients, but when I decided that I needed to come forward, there was no one listening.

Romany McNamara
BERKELEY, CALIF.

I am a trial attorney who has been with a public defenders' office for 23 years. I was downright gleeful when Lara Bazelon recounted her red-faced, angry, sarcastic, aggressive, and ultimately winning arguments before a judge. Her article was both therapeutic and provocative. I continue to yearn for a justice system where it will be almost a little boring and ho-hum to observe a racially, socially, and experientially diverse group of magistrates, judges, justices, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and civil litigators walking the back hallways of courthouses across the country.

Irene Pai
SANTA ANA, CALIF.

I'm sure Lara Bazelon is correct that female attorneys have to alter their speech, dress, and mannerisms to be successful in the courtroom, but that's nothing compared with what people of color—male and female—are required to do on a daily basis. As a black man who is not slight of stature, I am aware that displays of emotion that might be construed as passion or overlooked altogether coming from my white counterparts may easily be interpreted as threatening coming from me, or get me branded as an "angry black man." Black women, including Michelle Obama, have been called angry when they dare project a temperament other than sweetness and sunshine. Race is at least as important as gender in business communications if you are not a white male.

Steve Brown
BOWIE, MD.

Lara Bazelon's recent article relies on false premises to reach mistaken conclusions that, if accepted, might lead a reader to believe that female lawyers cannot be as effective in the courtroom as male lawyers are.

Ms. Bazelon states as a fact that juries “will be more willing to listen to and be convinced by a traditionally feminine woman.” This is an astonishingly broad statement that is belied by my own experience and that of many other female trial lawyers.

I became a criminal defense lawyer in 1979. Since then, I have been lead counsel on many high-profile cases all over the United States, taught trial practice at Berkeley Law, and lectured nationally on the subject of cross-examination. In 2010, I was inducted into the California Trial Lawyer Hall of Fame. I know what I’m talking about when it comes to litigating in a courtroom and conducting a trial.

Of course, I have encountered plenty of sexist attitudes during my career. I have heard many irritating comments about what I should wear and

how I should act. Depending on the situation, I have either directly confronted the people expressing those ideas or I have shrugged them off and moved on. There is no doubt that it is unfair that I and other women have the extra burden of confronting those sexist attitudes—but one thing I have never done is capitulate to them. Yet that is what Ms. Bazelon’s article advocates.

No doubt there are jurors and judges who don’t like seeing a woman being aggressive. But qualities and tactics that irk some jurors may win others over. More important, even the jurors who don’t like the aggression will get over it. If a juror tells me, as one once did, “I thought you were a bitch, but that witness was a liar,” I have won.

Ms. Bazelon’s premises and conclusions suggest

that neither public defenders’ offices nor private clients should ever hire a female lawyer. Why would you hire a woman to try your case if she can use only some of the tools that are available to a man?

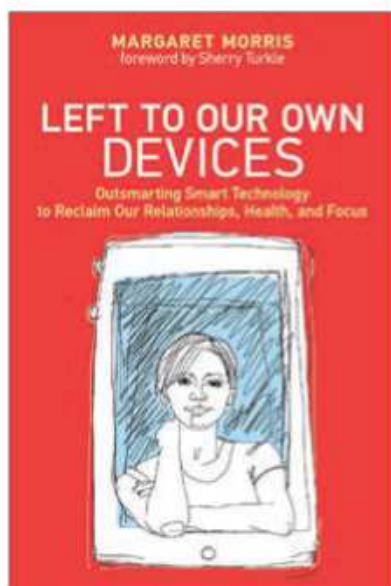
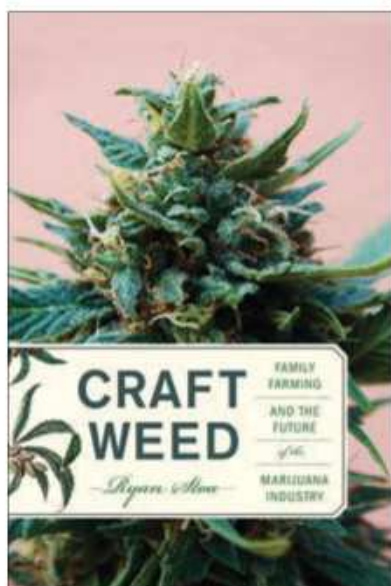
Ms. Bazelon concludes that “women lawyers don’t have access to the same ‘means and expedients’ that men do.” She worries that she is “holding [her] students back” by teaching the “same unfair rules that were passed on” to her. I agree with the latter proposition and disagree with the first. Ms. Bazelon should teach her students to look to successful female trial lawyers who have not conformed to “traditional feminine woman” expectations. She and her students should learn from them and follow their example.

Cris Arguedas
BERKELEY, CALIF.

The Next Populist Revolution

Establishment Democrats believe a diversifying electorate will secure their party’s future, Reihan Salam wrote in September. But second-generation Latinos won’t willingly accept a deeply unequal society.

Reihan Salam’s contention that the populist left will form an insurgency at odds with affluent white liberalism is almost certainly right. It’s even possible that such a liberalism would strip away white voters from the Republican base. But in arguing that a “brown populism” would form an anti-immigration alliance with the hard right, Salam ignores 60 years of racial antagonism that buttress the Republican Party. He suggests that his “brown populism” might ally with a political force hostile to its very



Craft Weed

Family Farming and the Future of the Marijuana Industry

By Ryan Stoa

How the future of post-legalization marijuana farming can be sustainable, local, and artisanal.

Extremism

By J. M. Berger

What extremism is, how extremist ideologies are constructed, and why extremism can escalate into violence.

Left to Our Own Devices

Outsmarting Smart Technology to Reclaim Our Relationships, Health, and Focus

By Margaret E. Morris

Foreword by Sherry Turkle

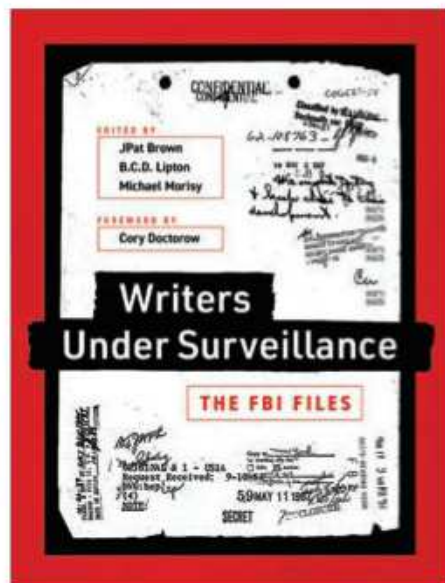
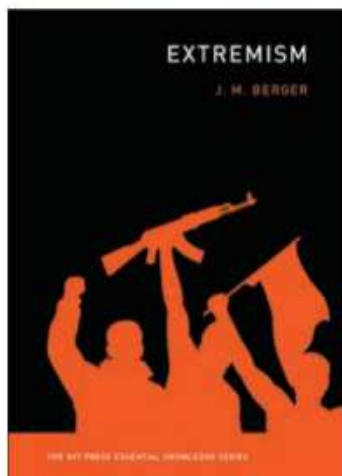
Unexpected ways that individuals adapt technology to reclaim what matters to them, from working through conflict with smart lights to celebrating gender transition with selfies.

Writers Under Surveillance

The FBI Files

Edited by JPat Brown, B. C. D. Lipton and Michael Morisy

FBI files on writers with dangerous ideas, including Hannah Arendt, Allen Ginsberg, Ernest Hemingway, Susan Sontag, and James Baldwin.



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presence in the country. Salam is right to point out the blindness of affluent liberals, but he seems unaware of his own.

Peter Amos
NEW YORK, N.Y.

If the children of Latino immigrants resist immigration from Asia and Africa as Salam predicts they will, they'll be following a rut worn by the children of British and German immigrants who resisted Irish immigration in the first half of the 19th century; Irish Americans who resisted Italian, Portuguese, and Eastern European immigrants; and so on. And Salam omits mention of a key driver of the wage growth that provided past immigrants



entrée to the middle class: a powerful labor movement.

The next generation of Latino Americans can do as Salam suggests and unite with working-class whites under a right-wing populist—that is, Republican—banner. If they do so, they'll ensure the continued dominance of the party dedicated to the extirpation of organized labor, and thus ensure a widening income and wealth gap and their own impoverishment.

Eric Scigliano
SEATTLE, WASH.

Reihan Salam replies:

Eric Scigliano is right to say that I did not address organized labor in my article. Had I done so, I might have mentioned the work of the renowned historian Jefferson Cowie, who has described the New Deal era as “the great exception” in American history, when a number of interrelated factors, including immigration restriction, fostered a sense of working-class solidarity that contributed to the vitality of the labor movement. This isn’t an argument for immigration restriction, of course. But it is important to remember that the more solidaristic politics of mid-century America did not emerge in a cultural vacuum.

And as for Peter Amos’s observation, I’ll note that the Republican and Democratic coalitions have evolved considerably over the past several decades, to the point where constituencies that once belonged to one major party have long since abandoned it for the other. Sixty years ago, both parties were quite ideologically diverse—for example, both parties included arch-segregationists and committed integrationists. And though each major party has grown more ideologically unified in the years since, the Trump era has brought to the surface new intraparty ideological cleavages, which will surely lead to the further reshuffling of partisan allegiances. If the children and grandchildren of today’s immigrants embrace a more restrictionist politics in the years to come, as has happened in the past, they’ll be living in a world as far removed from our politics as we are from the politics of the 1990s, when restrictionist Democrats and open-border Republicans were far more common. So I wouldn’t rule anything out.



How Poetry Came to Matter Again

Minority poets, queer poets, immigrant poets, refugee poets—a young generation of outsiders in America is exploring identity in new ways, Jesse Lichtenstein showed in September, and people are listening.

When the world is a tawdry reality-TV show that tries to steal our attention with every cheap trick in the book, it's hard to remember that there's more than cable-and-Twitter mudslinging, or escaping into fictions.

I didn't realize how much I was missing from poetry. The intellectual language-play and pastiche of modern poetry left me cold. I always sought the alternate voices that reflected deeper feelings and a yearning to be heard—Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde—but there was so much more in our current collective experience. After reading this article, I immediately bought a stack of works by the poets referenced—Chen Chen, Claudia Rankine (long overdue on my part), Fatimah Asghar, Aziza Barnes. And their poetry fed me, electrified me, angered me, soothed me, all at once. I'm beyond grateful for being introduced to a world of voices that I needed so badly.

Anita Schillhorn van Veen
MARINA DEL REY, CALIF.

What Really Killed the Dinosaurs?

The Princeton geologist Gerta Keller has endured decades of ridicule for arguing that the fifth extinction was caused not by an asteroid but by a series of colossal volcanic eruptions. Her fight with the asteroid camp, Bianca Bosker wrote in September, may be the nastiest feud in all of science.

In 1979, I gave the keynote speech to open a conference on “Life in the Universe,” held at the University of California at Berkeley. That night, at the banquet head table with NASA's chief and some other science bigwigs, I had hoped to hear some discussion of my talk. But all anyone wanted to chat about was the sensational news, then circulating on campus, that Luis Alvarez and his team of Berkeley researchers had found a “smoking gun” for an asteroid having belted the Earth and wiped out the dinosaurs.

Back at Harvard after the conference, I, an astrophysicist, felt enthused that astronomy had something to say about one of the outstanding puzzles in science. But my colleague, the biologist Stephen Jay Gould, ever the contrarian, initially balked at it. He invited me to his office in Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology, where, as an expert on dead life, he trotted out reams of geological and paleontological data implying that the dinosaurs could not have died in one big bang.

This blast from the past was tailor-made for Gould, a catastrophist at heart who had an idiosyncratic theory that evolution works in fits and starts “punctuated” by

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sudden events. After I told him about the asteroid evidence, Gould still argued that a gradual series of intense volcanoes some 67 million years ago released megatons of hot lava and toxic gas, possibly sending the dinosaurs (and much other life) on their way toward extinction nearly 1 million years before the big rock ever arrived.

For years thereafter, Gould and I taught back-to-back

courses in Harvard's largest lecture hall, his about biological evolution and mine about cosmic evolution, offering students broad surveys of life on Earth and maybe beyond—but often diverging accounts of the fate of the dinosaurs. He would lambaste those claiming that an asteroid was the sole culprit, while I would smugly relate how physics had solved what was perhaps biology's most celebrated problem.

Yet, much as evolution is the study of change in nature, both our views eventually changed. Before he died in 2002, Gould fully embraced the asteroid-impact idea, telling me that this rock of ages did, after all, best bolster his take on evolution. Meanwhile, as my students often challenged me to explain the devilish details of the world's biggest detective story, I reassessed old data and examined new data while becoming increasingly convinced that volcanoes were likely the main cause, with an asteroid perhaps providing a knockout blow that finished the dinosaurs off.

Hardly anything in science is for keeps. Ideas change as data accumulate. If future evidence causes me to change my mind again, that's okay. That's how the scientific method works, always

revising what we thought we knew, eventually casting aside the emotional hoopla, and ultimately granting us not a measure of truth so much as a better approximation of reality.

Eric J. Chaisson
CONCORD, MASS.

Correction:

Due to an editing error, "What Really Killed the Dinosaurs?" (September) stated that in Gerta Keller's Deccan Traps theory of dinosaur extinction, the combination of carbon dioxide and methane would have raised temperatures on land by as much as 46 degrees Fahrenheit. In fact, it would have raised land temperatures by 14.4 degrees Fahrenheit.

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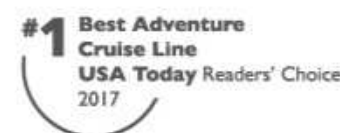
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No single definition qualifies someone as a homesteader, but bloggers' neo-frontier dispatches generally combine elements of *Goop*, *Little House on the Prairie*, and *Mad Max*. The more extreme ones offer tips on building yurts without plumbing (but with Wi-Fi) or finding water in the event of societal collapse.

— Bianca Bosker, p. 22



DISPATCHES

IDEAS & PROVOCATIONS

NOVEMBER 2018



• POLITICS

THE CASE FOR LIBERAL REPUBLICANISM

Classical liberal values have disappeared from the right and are now disappearing from the left. Someone needs to reclaim them. Why not the GOP?

BY DAVID FRUM

THE WORD *LIBERAL* was one of the many casualties of the Vietnam era.

A generation before, Americans competed to own the term. Anti-New Deal Republicans like Senator Robert Taft claimed that they, not their opponents, were the “true liberals.” Former President Herbert Hoover preferred the term *historical liberal*.

The social turmoil of the 1960s and '70s ripped away *liberal's* positive

associations and, in so doing, helped redeem conservatism from the discredit it incurred during the Great Depression. In 1985, Jonathan Rieder, then a sociologist at Yale, vividly described the political evolution of a middle-class Brooklyn neighborhood in which he had lived:

Since 1960, the Jews and Italians of Canarsie have embellished and modified the meaning of liberalism, associating it with profligacy, spinelessness, malevolence, masochism, elitism, fantasy, anarchy, idealism, softness, irresponsibility, and sanctimoniousness. The term *conservative* acquired connotations of pragmatism, character, reciprocity, truthfulness, stoicism, manliness, realism, hardness, vengeance, strictness, and responsibility.

In 1994, Governor Mario Cuomo of New York, a Democrat, lost his last election to a Republican who devastatingly attacked him as “too liberal, too long.”

In defensive reaction, left-of-center Democrats sought to rebrand themselves as something other than liberal. The label that eventually prevailed was *progressive*. The Congressional Progressive Caucus now numbers 78; it is the largest bloc on the Democratic side of the House of Representatives. There is no “liberal caucus.”

But a curious thing happens when you banish liberalism from your vocabulary. You rehabilitate illiberalism. As politics devolves into what President Barack Obama recently described as “a hostile competition between tribes and races and religions,” illiberalism seems to be spreading—and not only on the nationalist right, but also on the intersectional left.

The hopeful world of the very late 20th century—the world of NAFTA and an expanding NATO; of the World Wide Web 1.0 and liberal interventionism; of the global spread of democracy under leaders such as Václav Havel and Nelson Mandela—now looks battered and delusive. The triumphalist mood of that bygone world was best distilled by Francis Fukuyama in his 1989 essay “The End of History,” in which he proclaimed liberal democracy the end state of human affairs.

Earlier this year, Fukuyama published an update confessing that his thesis had not aged well. Liberal democracy, he said, is not ascending. The world seems to be reverting to “a political spectrum

organized increasingly around identity issues, many of which are defined more by culture than by economics.”

We got here through a series of harrowing experiences. The 9/11 attacks reminded us that religious violence is as modern as jet aircraft. The Iraq War discredited the governments that waged it and the elites who urged it, as I did. The financial crisis of 2008 called into question the stability of market economies; the lopsided recovery cast doubt on their fairness.

The euro currency crisis of 2010 revived European nationalism. China’s rise and Russia’s revanchism offered new hope to illiberal rulers worldwide. Mass immigration brought different ethnicities into closer contact, and sparked greater friction. New populist movements targeted the free press and independent judiciaries as enemies. Intellectuals claiming to speak for marginalized minorities rejected free speech and cultural exchange.

In this grim new world, former antagonists discovered much in common. Is Julian Assange right-wing or left-wing? Who knows? And does it matter? Is Brexit right-wing or left-wing? Is it right-wing or left-wing to oppose the Trans-Pacific Partnership, NAFTA, and NATO? To distrust vaccines? Across the democratic world, these positions unite the far edges of the political spectrum. Donald Trump and Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of Britain’s Labour Party, share more or less the same opinions about Ukraine and Syria. The hard right and hard left share darkly similar views about Jews.

The extremes agree at a deeper philosophical level as well. Both dismiss the ideal of neutral principles and impersonal processes as illusions, even lies. Both insist that law only masks power, that truth is subordinate to ideology, that politics is war.

BUT WHAT OF THOSE who do not see the world this way?

If the Trump years have achieved anything positive, it is to jolt a new generation into appreciating the value of the institutional legacies now under attack: Free trade. International partnerships. Honest courts and accountable leaders. Civil rights and civil liberties. Private space

for faith but public policy informed by science. A social-insurance system that cushions failure and a market economy that incentivizes success.

Surely these things still command the assent of enough of us that we can continue our usual political disagreements—about health care, about taxes, about how to govern schools and fund roads—without demolishing the shared foundations of the constitutional order.

Earlier this year, Patrick J. Deneen of Notre Dame University published a short,

A curious thing happens when you banish liberalism from your vocabulary. You rehabilitate illiberalism.

fierce polemic titled *Why Liberalism Failed*. The book, which gained respectful attention across the political spectrum, argued that liberalism had not delivered on its central promises:

The liberal state expands to control nearly every aspect of life while citizens regard government as a distant and uncontrollable power ... relentlessly advancing the project of “globalization.” The only rights that seem secure today belong to those with sufficient wealth and position to protect them ... The economy favors a new “meritocracy” that perpetuates its advantages through generational succession ... A political philosophy that was launched to foster greater equity, defend a pluralist tapestry of different cultures and beliefs, protect human dignity, and, of course, expand liberty, in practice generates titanic inequality, enforces uniformity and homogeneity, fosters material and spiritual degradation, and undermines freedom.

You can read those words, appreciate why somebody might believe them—and still categorically reject them as false and dangerous. The advanced democracies have built the freest, most just, and best societies in human history. Those societies demand many improvements, for

sure—incremental, practical reforms, with careful attention to unintended consequences. But not revolution. Not the burn-it-all-down fantasies of the new populists.

“What is conservatism?” asked Abraham Lincoln, in 1860, of those who sought the breakup of the existing government of the United States. “Is it not adherence to the old and tried, against the new and untried?” Today we find ourselves in the awkward linguistic predicament of the “old and tried” being advocated by people who call themselves liberals—while those pushing for the “new and untried” call themselves conservatives. “America and the West are on a trajectory toward something very bad,” prophesied the famous pro-Trump “Flight 93 Election” essay of September 2016, which argued that only desperate measures could hope to save the country. The author, Michael Anton (who would go on to work in the Trump administration), compared voting for Trump to playing Russian roulette: putting a bullet in a revolver, spinning the chamber, pressing the muzzle to the temple, and pulling the trigger. And he meant this as a recommendation!

To protect what was achieved in the wake of World War II and following the Cold War requires beating back the populist enemies of liberal democracy, radical and reactionary alike. For those of us on the right-hand side of the political spectrum, this beating-back will oblige us to face some painful truths about our political home. The Republican Party has disgracefully submitted itself to Trumpism. Recovering will not be easy. But so long as the U.S. retains the Electoral College, the country will have a two-party system. Rehabilitating a tainted party is less daunting than building a new one. To this end, Republicans would do well to relearn what Robert Taft and Herbert Hoover knew about the liberal basis of the American constitutional order.

SOME RIGHT-LEANING thinkers and writers are already reappraising the word *liberal*. The rightist podcasting star Ben Shapiro has favorably invoked “classical liberal values.” Jordan B. Peterson, the left-skeptical psychologist who has recently developed a following among young men, calls himself a “classical liberal,” not a conservative. So does Dave Rubin, the host of one of the most popular YouTube talk shows—he even markets a CLASSICAL LIBERAL T-shirt. The Republican Speaker of the House, Paul Ryan, has

But as to preserving competition in the health-care industry in the age of Obamacare, spurring wage growth in a globalized economy, and regaining respect from allies and partners repelled by Trump, fruitful conversations have scarcely begun among right-leaning Americans.

Such conversations might start with the following insights. First, the Trump presidency has exposed great weaknesses in American government and society. Just as Watergate was followed by half a decade of clean-government and market-deregulating reforms, so new policies are needed to ensure that nothing like this shameful presidency recurs. These policies must attend not only to neglected ethical norms but also to neglected social troubles. Extreme class and ethnic divisions enable demagogues on both the left and the right.

Second, America and its closest allies are not as globally dominant as they were in the 1990s. China’s economy has overtaken Japan’s as the world’s second-largest, and continues to grow; the Indian economy will soon surpass that of the United Kingdom. In the 21st century, even more than in the 20th, the United States will need allies and partners. America First is America alone; America alone is America defeated.

Finally, the United States has borrowed from the future by spending more than it receives from taxes and by releasing more climate-changing gases than it absorbs. Both of these binges must cease if

this generation intends to keep faith with the Constitution’s promise to secure the blessings of liberty for posterity.

THE REPUBLICAN PARTY is losing its ability to prevail in democratic competition. One solution to that dilemma, the Trump solution, is to weaken democracy so that a minority can dominate a disunited majority. The



said of himself, “I really call myself a classical liberal more than a conservative.”

So far, though, this designation seems more a way to avoid political negatives—Libertarianism minus Ron Paul’s crankiness! Conservatism without Donald Trump’s brutishness!—than a positive vision. Some of these self-described classical liberals make sensible points about the excesses of left-wing identity politics.

2018 midterm elections will offer a referendum on whether that method can work. If Republicans avoid too-severe losses, the party will likely continue on its present antidemocratic path. But if the losses are significant, the party might be forced to find its way to a more inclusive politics, one that is less plutocratic, less theocratic, less racially chauvinist. Such an evolution will not be easy, but it can be achieved, if moderate Republicans are willing to fight for it.

The liberal Republicans of the 1960s and '70s faded into irrelevance because they would not go toe-to-toe for their principles. As Mark Schmitt of *New America* has written, "They were not ideologues, but the opposite. They put loyalty to party, right or wrong, over their other commitments." His unfriendly valedictory points to a useful lesson: A political faction need not be huge to exert influence over a party, provided it leverages its power by threatening to leave when its core priorities are in jeopardy.

In a 2015 debate among Republican presidential hopefuls, Fox News's Bret Baier asked each candidate whether he or she would pledge to support the ticket regardless of the winner. Only one refused: Donald Trump. After the debate, then-Republican National Committee Chair Reince Priebus scurried to gain Trump's signature on a pledge form. Why did no organized group of Republicans serve Trump and his backers a taste of their own medicine? *If Trump wins, we leave.* In politics, it's very often the people nearest the exits who claim the most attention.

A liberal Republicanism should demand reforms that forbid the corrupt practices of the Trump presidency. It should accept that expanded health coverage is here to stay—about time!—and then work to increase competition, incentives, and fair pricing within a universal system, so as to combat the wasteful American habit of spending more health dollars than any other developed country, for worse health outcomes. It should seek fiscal and environmental balance, by cutting spending, by taxing greenhouse-gas emissions, and by taxing consumption more and investment less.

As increasing numbers of Democrats shift leftward on economic issues, even to the point of identifying as socialists, their party is becoming more statist and

more redistributive. Many Americans will reject this approach, and they will need a party to champion their beliefs. At a time when populists muse about nationalizing Google's data and regulating Facebook as a public utility, liberal Republicans should harken to Theodore Roosevelt's tradition of restraining monopoly abuse yet upholding free enterprise and private property.

While the Democratic Party adapts to America's new multiethnic demographics by focusing more on group identity and less on individual opportunity, liberal Republicans should oppose both racial preferences *and* racial prejudice. The next Republican president should as joyously wish Americans a happy Diwali as a merry Christmas. At the same time, the country's immigration intake should be adjusted to stabilize the foreign-born percentage of the population. Diversity may be an American strength, but so too is unity and cohesion.

In reaction to the Iraq War and the Great Recession, America has turned inward, even as the world has continued to need U.S. leadership. Internationalism, free trade, and alliances should be principles of both parties. Donald Trump has persuaded conservative Republicans to reject them, but liberal Republicans should champion them.

For two political generations, Republicans have proclaimed the purity of their conservatism. But in a democratic society, conservatism and liberalism are not really opposites. They are different facets of the common democratic creed. What conservatives are conserving, after all, is a liberal order. That truth has been easy to overlook in the friction of partisan politics. It must be reaffirmed now, in this hour of liberal peril. **A**

David Frum is a staff writer at The Atlantic and the author of Trumpocracy. In 2001 and 2002, he was a speechwriter for President George W. Bush.

• VERY SHORT BOOK EXCERPT

Crushed Bugs, Calf Brains, and Other Wholesome Staples of the Past



• Adapted from *The Poison Squad: One Chemist's Single-Minded Crusade for Food Safety at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, by Deborah Blum, published by Penguin Press in September

WE TEND TO think of our 19th-century forefathers thriving on farm-fresh produce and pasture-raised livestock, happily unaffected by the deceptive food-manufacturing practices of today. In this we are wrong. Milk offers a stunning case in point. By mid-century, the standard, profit-maximizing recipe was a pint of lukewarm water for every quart of milk—after the cream had been skimmed off. To whiten the bluish liquid, dairymen added plaster of paris and chalk, or a dollop of molasses for a creamy gold. To replace the skimmed-off layer of cream, they might add a final flourish of pureed calf brains.

Fakery and adulteration ran rampant in other products as well. "Honey" in many cases proved to be thickened, colored corn syrup, and "vanilla" extract a mixture of alcohol and brown food coloring. "Coffee" might be largely sawdust, or wheat, beans, beets, peas, and dandelion seeds, scorched black and ground to resemble the genuine article. Containers of "pepper," "cinnamon," or "nutmeg" were frequently laced with pulverized coconut shells, charred rope, or floor sweepings. "Flour" routinely contained crushed stone or gypsum as a cheap extender. Ground insects could be mixed into brown sugar, often without detection; their use was linked to an unpleasant condition known as "grocer's itch."



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• SKETCH

THE HOMESTEADER

How Shaye Elliott became the Gwyneth Paltrow of pioneer living

BY BIANCA BOSKER

RUNNING LATE after several wrong turns, I made a final, desperate attempt to locate Shaye Elliott's home by driving into what appeared to be an apple orchard. Down a dirt path, past a gaggle of squawking geese, in the shadow of the town's 10-story cross, there it was: the two-acre property outside Wenatchee, Washington, on which Elliott cultivates nearly all the food she feeds herself, her husband, and their four children. The Elliots' squat three-bedroom house, which they renovated themselves, was nestled among a pigpen, a rabbit hutch, a chicken coop, two pastures, and three gardens, the sum total of which Elliott refers to as her "homestead"—a nod to the back-to-basics, pioneer-inflected movement that inspired her lifestyle.

Shortly after I arrived, Elliott started preparing breakfast. As she poached eggs taken from her coop and sizzled potatoes in fat rendered from ducks she'd slaughtered last fall, she recounted a recent trip to Los Angeles. She still seemed scarred by the experience. "I couldn't bear it," she told me. "Everything smelled like Lysol and Febreze, and I was just like, 'Oh my gosh, the sound of the traffic!'" That visit had admittedly been better than her previous one, when she ate "that kind of food"—a restaurant salad prepared with conventionally grown ingredients—and promptly threw up.

Elliott, who is 32 years old, "homesteads" not because it's practical (it's not) or because she grew up farming (she didn't) but because, she says, modern

technology "has stripped people of their purpose." In hopes of "drawing on and learning things of the past," she has for eight years rejected an increasing number of modern conveniences. Like the 19th-century homesteaders who traveled west in covered wagons, she churns butter, stocks her larder before winter, and treats illnesses with herbs. Unlike the pioneers, however, she enthusiastically broadcasts her life to an audience of Instagram followers, YouTube subscribers, book buyers, and 100,000 monthly readers of her blog, *The Elliott Homestead*. One of her chickens, Helen, has become a celebrity for antics like sneaking into the house to peck at butter. "You think these Instagram Stories are made up," Elliott said as a less famous chicken wandered through the front door. "Very much not."

Elliott belongs to a growing network of bloggers who have tapped into—and fueled—the growing homesteading movement, which encourages self-reliance through the embrace of traditional skills and subsistence farming. A homesteader seeks to "be a producer and not just a consumer," Elliott said. (She and others distinguish themselves from farmers in harvesting food solely for their own needs, not to sell.) The appeal of this retro-agrarian lifestyle transcends ideological differences, uniting farmwives and feminists, hippies and Christians, preppers and yuppies, from Brooklyn to rural Alaska. Despite its ostensible rejection of consumerism, the subculture has spawned a brisk trade in homesteading-themed TV shows, books, gear, and courses. Last year, the inaugural Homesteaders of America conference drew 1,500 attendees—more than twice the expected turnout—and organizers expect hundreds more this year.

No single definition qualifies someone as a homesteader, but bloggers' neo-frontier dispatches generally combine elements of *Goop*, *Little House on the Prairie*, and *Mad Max*. The more extreme ones offer tips on building yurts without plumbing (but with Wi-Fi) or finding water in the event of societal collapse. Most provide instruction on insourcing necessities, such as forging knives, making deodorant, and spinning wool.

Like a disproportionate number of these bloggers, Elliott is a white woman with a bearded husband, homeschooled children, faith in Jesus Christ, and many

photos of soulful cows. Her posts range from the practical (“Homemade Fly Spray (That Really Works!)”) to the personal (“Date Night With My Man”). Generously sprinkled with *ol*’s and *Amens*, they read like emails from a down-to-earth friend. Her vision of homesteading is nostalgic but comfortable, escapist but accessible, even to followers who still shop at supermarkets. She milks her cow Cecilia each morning and forages raspberry leaves for tea, but also invests in shabby-chic chandeliers and a refrigerator. (“Indoor plumbing is a really beautiful gift,” according to Elliott, who does not aspire to total self-sufficiency.)

The top social-media influencers’ followings dwarf Elliott’s, but she has one of the larger audiences in homestead circles. Her reach has been amplified by a Food Network pilot and four lushly illustrated books, which have been sold in Target and Costco stores.

HOMESTEADING, romanticized by nearly every generation save the one that originally endured it, has routinely been embraced by Americans during periods of anxiety and upheaval. “The

A thriving homestead is funded by individuals who are still in the rat race and lust after escape.

entire history of America is that in times of political and economic insecurity, people revert to a very visceral sense that taking control of their food and of their homes is where security lies,” says Toni Smith, a homesteader and an English professor at Vancouver Island University. Smith notes that the back-to-the-land movement especially resonates with middle-class white Americans: “The *Little House on the Prairie* touchstone is their default.” (Not surprisingly, the term *homesteading* has been criticized by some observers of the current movement, in part for its associations with a government policy that had disastrous consequences for American Indians.)

Versions of homesteading flourished after the Great Depression, during the

Vietnam War, in the years before Y2K, during the Great Recession, and again more recently, amid the rise of an anti-establishment ethos. When I asked Elliott, who leans libertarian, why her lifestyle resonates among progressives and Tea Partiers alike, she said, “I think a common thread is a mistrust in the Man.”

Elliott’s interest in homesteading increased as her faith in the food system waned. The daughter of a probation officer and a dental hygienist, she grew up on low-fat Oreos in Wenatchee, the self-proclaimed “apple capital of the world.” While dating a boy who raised livestock, she fell in love with cows. She studied beef production at Washington State University and then worked at a feedlot, but she quit after six months, disgusted by the mistreatment of the cattle. “The entire system just didn’t seem to add up,” she said. She juggled various jobs—in real estate, insurance, floristry—while small experiences nudged her toward a more hands-on approach to life. Reading *The Balanced Plate*—a celebration of organic, macrobiotic, and Ayurvedic cuisine—convinced her “that what you eat affects your health.” Meeting a co-worker who knit—“just the most romantic, old-fashioned thing I’d ever seen”—inspired her to do the same.

Although Elliott says she and her husband, Stuart, were “stupid poor” when their first child was born, in 2010, she stopped working and began doing more by hand, while the growing family lived off Stuart’s \$28,000 teaching salary. Elliott studied homesteading blogs to master skills like making chicken stock and canning, then launched a blog of her own, even though her “homestead” then amounted to little more than potted herbs. Within three years, she’d purchased her first cow, which she found on Craigslist.

Making staples from scratch has since become second nature. While we spoke, Elliott picked kale to garnish the eggs; after breakfast she seamlessly transitioned to baking bread, marinating a leg of a lamb she’d butchered last fall, tidying up with homemade cleaning products, and washing the dishes, which she enjoys doing by hand. “It forces me to slow down

a bit, which I appreciate,” she said. Meanwhile, her husband fed animals, chased down a stray lamb, and repaired the fence through which it had escaped.

Their activities echoed scenes on other homesteading blogs: men hammering and sawing, wives cooking and caring for children. At a time when women are advocating for more equitable treatment, was Elliott’s shift toward traditional gender roles deliberate? “It’s kind of just the natural form of things in this lifestyle,” she said. She is a devout follower of Reformed Presbyterianism, a sect of Protestantism that views the Bible as the literal word of God, and she believes that men and women “were designed with specific roles.” “We’ve spent so much time and energy fighting that,” she told me. “And I don’t think that makes people happier.” She tends to her crops in makeup and false lashes; after tidying up the kitchen, she disappeared to apply lipstick and concealer.

Although homesteading sites tend to celebrate the cult of domesticity—Elliott has a post commending the modest femininity of long skirts from the Edwardian era—the offline reality is more complicated: Like many young women who’ve amassed large online followings by documenting their lives as homemakers, she is her family’s breadwinner. In 2014, a fellow blogger recruited her to sell essential oils for doTerra, a multilevel marketing company whose logo is plastered across homesteading sites. Within a year, her business was so profitable that Stuart quit his job; Elliott now makes \$500,000 a year selling to fellow “oilers.” Her blog, which helps her recruit customers and salespeople, is heavy on suggestions for using oils. In one 10-day period on Instagram, she demonstrated how geranium oil could heal a duck’s infected foot, how lemongrass could repel pests, and how Roman chamomile and rosemary had cured her son’s hives.

Instagramming from a haven established to escape technology’s frenzied pace may seem incongruous, but Elliott insists that social media provide advice and moral support, which are lacking in the isolated areas where many homesteaders settle. “Most people still don’t live this way. You’re kind of the odd man out,” she said, adding that she’d met her best friends, who all live in different states, through their blogs. “If I have a problem

with my cow I have one local person I can call that would know what's up. If I go online, I can ask 10."

THE REST OF Elliott's day elapsed in a series of chores: weeding, picking spinach for lunch, cleaning up after the chickens, weeding some more, feeding the pigs, weeding again. She rejects the idea that success should involve anything more than maintaining a home. "We live in a culture that's very epic. Everything needs to be epic and awesome ... Living a very average life? That's seen as you not living up to your potential. And I really fight against that. I think the everyday is the point of our life," she said. "It's okay to be in the kitchen working with a baby on your hip. That isn't a regressive thing; it is an intentional thing."

By and large, homesteading's champions have embraced their way of life for reasons more spiritual than utilitarian. The "About Me" sections of other homesteading sites are filled with stories of how debt and burnout inspired the author to find a path that did not require sacrificing life for livelihood. Like Marie Antoinette's pleasure dairy, tilling the soil and milking cows acquire a certain charm when they are a choice, not a necessity. Elliott readily concedes that if the broccoli harvest fails—as it has every other year—her family won't starve; they'll use their doTerra money to stock up at the supermarket. Abandoning the status quo is itself a luxury: Elliott estimates that starting a homestead like hers demands at least \$25,000, not including land.

Supporting this back-to-basics lifestyle in many cases requires homesteading bloggers to tether themselves to the mainstream, if not through multilevel marketing, then via Google ads, Etsy shops, sponsored posts, or paywalled content, which Elliott plans to introduce. For neo-pioneers like her, a thriving homestead is funded by individuals who are still in the rat race and lust after escape.

After I left, Elliott posted on Instagram a photo of the hollyhocks and black-eyed Susans in her garden, accompanied by the caption "Phone down. Eyes up. Breath deep." It received more than 1,200 likes. "Beautiful garden, love the phone down idea!!" wrote one follower. **A**

Bianca Bosker is a contributing editor at The Atlantic.



• ANIMAL KINGDOM

Survival of the Cutest

How puppies manipulate us

BY SARAH ELIZABETH ADLER

"ALL PUPPIES are cute," explains Clive Wynne, the head of Arizona State University's canine-science laboratory. "But not all puppies are equally cute." Indeed, breeders have long found that puppies become their cutest selves at the eight-week mark; any older, and some breeders offer a discount to bolster would-be owners' weakened desire. Such fine-tuned preferences might seem arbitrary, even cruel. But recent research indicates that peak puppy cuteness serves important purposes—and might play a fundamental role in binding dog and owner together.

In a study published this spring, Wynne and his colleagues sought to pin down, scientifically, the timeline of puppy cuteness. Their finding largely matched that of breeders: People consistently rated dogs most attractive when they were six to eight weeks old. This age, Wynne says, coincides with a

crucial developmental milestone: Mother dogs stop nursing their young around the eighth week, after which pups rely on humans for survival. (Puppies without human caretakers face mortality rates of up to 95 percent in their first year of life.) Peak cuteness, then, is no accident—at exactly the moment when our intervention matters most, puppies become irresistible to us.

It doesn't hurt that humans seem to be especially vulnerable to cute things. Research dating back to the 1940s shows that virtually any creature with babylike features—large eyes, a bulging forehead, short limbs—is capable of drawing our affection, from the unsurprising (seals, koalas) to the odd (axolotls, a type of salamander) to the inanimate (Mickey Mouse). But canine cuteness is uniquely human-directed, and its strategic deployment is not confined to puppies. In a 2017 study of dogs ages one to 12, psychologists in the

United Kingdom showed that people's pets were significantly more likely to raise their brows and stick out their tongue when humans were looking at them, visual cues that lend grown canines a puppyish air. Other research makes clear just why dogs seek to command our attention in this way. Oxytocin, the so-called love hormone, has been found to surge in dogs and their owners after they look in each other's eyes—initiating the same feedback loop that exists between human mothers and their babies. In other words, the more dogs get us to look at them, the more tightly bonded to them we grow.

Born blind and basically deaf, puppies aren't interactive in their first weeks of life, and Wynne notes that many people find animals in this stage alien and unappealing. A recent study focused on humans showed that, similar to six-week-old puppies, six-month-old babies are seen as significantly cuter than newborns.

Which brings us to the final purpose of peak cuteness: to make up for newborn ugliness. As the psychologists Gary Sherman and Jonathan Haidt have proposed, the delayed onset of cuteness in human babies offers benefits far beyond kicking our caretaking instinct into overdrive—it also prompts a flood of social interactions, such as petting, playing, and baby-talking. These acts are developmentally crucial to puppies as well, but they can't be carried out very effectively with the extremely young. And so "one is not born cute," Sherman and Haidt conclude. "One becomes cute." **A**



So Your Name Doesn't Make Sense Anymore

An essay by



You've got a good problem. You started a business and chose a specific name that accurately reflected what you were doing. It made sense at the time. But then you started growing your business with Mailchimp. Now you're doing way more things than you originally did. And your business name that made sense back then now seems a little nonsensical. You've outgrown your name.

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Let's get back to that good problem, or should we say, good opportunity. After all, your name got you all this business to begin with. Why change it now? You earned this outgrown name of yours! It means

you've expanded your business beyond your wildest dreams. People will look at you now and say, "Well, look at them now."

But we don't just want you to keep growing. We want you to keep outgrowing. We want people to see your business name and wax poetic about your humble beginnings, then have a chuckle because they know how much more you do now. Your business, and its comically constricting name, should be the subject of think pieces and listicles, and essays in *The Atlantic*.

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• POLITICS

WAS GARY HART SET UP?

What are we to make of the deathbed confession of the political operative Lee Atwater, newly revealed, that he staged the events that brought down Gary Hart in 1987?

BY JAMES FALLOWS

IN THE SPRING OF 1990, after he had helped the first George Bush reach the presidency, the political consultant Lee Atwater learned that he was dying. Atwater, who had just turned 39 and was the head of the Republican National Committee, had suffered a seizure while at a political fund-raising breakfast and had been diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor. In a year he was dead.

Atwater put some of that year to use making amends. Throughout his meteoric political rise he had been known for both his effectiveness and his brutality. In South Carolina, where he grew up, he helped defeat a congressional candidate who had openly discussed his teenage struggles with depression by telling reporters that the man had once been

“hooked up to jumper cables.” As the campaign manager for then-Vice President George H. W. Bush in 1988, when he defeated Michael Dukakis in the general election, Atwater leveraged the issue of race—a specialty for him—by means of the infamous “Willie Horton” TV ad. The explicit message of the commercial was that, as governor of Massachusetts, Dukakis had been soft on crime by offering furloughs to convicted murderers; Horton ran away while on furlough and then committed new felonies, including rape. The implicit message was the menace posed by hulking, scowling black men—like the Willie Horton who was shown in the commercial.

In the last year of his life, Atwater publicly apologized for tactics like these. He told Tom Turnipseed, the object of his “jumper cables” attack, that he viewed the episode as “one of the low points” of his career. He apologized to Dukakis for the “naked cruelty” of the Willie Horton ad.

And in a private act of repentance that has remained private for nearly three decades, he told Raymond Strother that he was sorry for how he had torpedoed Gary Hart’s chances of becoming president.

STROTHER, 10 YEARS OLDER than Atwater, had been his Democratic competitor and counterpart, minus the gutter-fighting. During the early Reagan years, when Atwater worked in the White House, Strother joined the staff of the Democratic Party’s most promising and glamorous young figure, Senator Gary Hart of Colorado. Strother was Hart’s media consultant and frequent traveling companion during his run for the nomination in 1984, when he gave former Vice President Walter Mondale a scare. As the campaign for the 1988 nomination geared up, Strother planned to play a similar role.

In early 1987, the Hart campaign had an air of likelihood if not inevitability that is difficult to imagine in retrospect. After Mondale’s landslide defeat by Ronald Reagan in 1984, Hart had become the heir apparent and best hope to lead the party back to the White House. The presumed Republican nominee was Bush, Reagan’s vice president, who was seen at the time, like many vice presidents before him, as a lackluster understudy. Since the FDR-Truman era, no party had won three straight presidential elections, which the Republicans would obviously have to do if Bush were to succeed Reagan.

Gary Hart had a nationwide organization and had made himself a recognized expert on military and defense policy. I first met him in those days, and wrote about him in *Atlantic* articles that led to my 1981 book, *National Defense*. (I’ve stayed in touch with him since then and have respected his work and his views.)

The Hart downfall had consequences that will be debated for as long as the man’s name is remembered.

Early polls are notoriously unreliable, but after the 1986 midterms, and then-New York Governor Mario Cuomo’s announcement that he would not run, many national surveys showed Hart with a lead in the Democratic field and also over Bush. Hart’s principal vulnerability was the press’s suggestion that something about him was hidden, excessively

private, or “unknowable.” Among other things, this was a way of alluding to suspicions of extramarital affairs—a theme in most accounts of that campaign, including Matt Bai’s 2014 *All the Truth Is Out*. Still, as Bai wrote in his book, “Everyone agreed: it was Hart’s race to lose.”

Strother and Atwater had the mutually respectful camaraderie of highly skilled rivals. “Lee and I were friends,” Strother told me when I spoke with him by phone recently. “We’d meet after campaigns and have coffee, talk about why I did what I did and why he did what he did.” One of the campaigns they met to discuss afterward was that 1988 presidential race, which Atwater (with Bush) had of course ended up winning, and from which Hart had dropped out. But later, during what Atwater realized would be the final weeks of his life, Atwater phoned Strother to discuss one more detail of that campaign.

Atwater had the strength to talk for only five minutes. “It wasn’t a ‘conversation,’” Strother said when I spoke with him recently. “There weren’t any pleasantries. It was like he was working down a checklist, and he had something he had to tell me before he died.”

What he wanted to say, according to Strother, was that the episode that had triggered Hart’s withdrawal from the race, which became known as the *Monkey Business* affair, had been not bad luck but a trap. The sequence of events was confusing at the time and is widely misremembered now. But in brief:

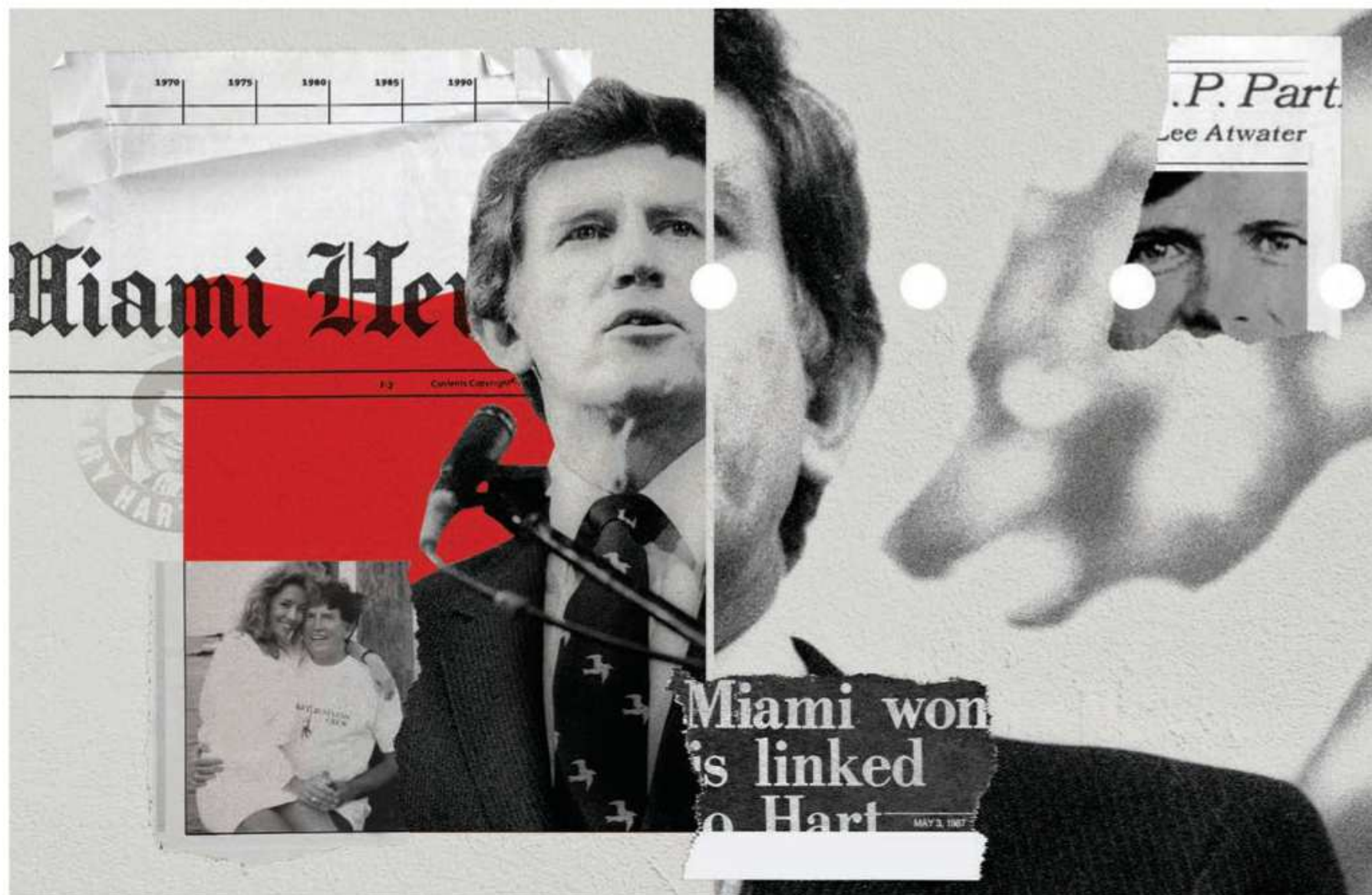
In late March 1987, Hart spent a weekend on a Miami-based yacht called *Monkey Business*. Two young women joined the boat when it sailed to Bimini. While the boat was docked there, one of the women took a picture of Hart sitting on the pier, with the other, Donna Rice, in his lap. A month after this trip, in early May, the man who had originally invited Hart onto the boat brought the same two women to Washington. *The Miami Herald* had received a tip about the upcoming visit and was staking out the front of Hart’s house. (A famous profile of Hart by E. J. Dionne in *The New York Times Magazine*, in which Hart invited the press to “follow me around,” came out after this stakeout—not before, contrary to common belief.) A *Herald* reporter saw Rice and Hart going into the house through the front door and, not realizing that

there was a back door, assumed—when he didn’t see her again—that she had spent the night.

Amid the resulting flap about Hart’s “character” and honesty, he quickly suspended his campaign (within a week), which effectively ended it. Several weeks later came the part of the episode now best remembered: the photo of Hart and Rice together in Bimini, on the cover of the *National Enquirer*.

Considering what American culture has swallowed as irrelevant or forgivable since then, it may be difficult to imagine that allegations of a consensual extramarital affair might really have caused an otherwise-favored presidential candidate to leave the race. Yet anyone who was following American politics at the time can tell you that this occurred. For anyone who wasn’t around, there is Bai’s book and an upcoming film based on it: *The Front Runner*, starring Hugh Jackman as Hart.

But was the plotline of Hart’s self-destruction too perfect? Too convenient? Might the nascent Bush campaign, with Atwater as its manager, have been looking for a way to help a potentially strong opponent leave the field?



PAUL LIEBHARDT/CORBIS; NATIONAL ENQUIRER/GETTY; ASSOCIATED PRESS

"I thought there was something fishy about the whole thing from the very beginning," Strother recalled. "Lee told me that he had set up the whole *Monkey Business* deal. 'I did it!' he told me. 'I fixed Hart.' After he called me that time, I thought, *My God! It's true!*"

Strother's conversation with Atwater happened in 1991. He mainly kept the news to himself. As the years went by, he discreetly mentioned the conversation to some journalists and other colleagues, but not to Gary Hart. "I probably should have told him at the time," he said recently. "It was a judgment call, and I didn't see the point in involving him in another controversy."

Crucially, Strother realized, he had no proof, and probably never would. Atwater was dead. Although Hart did not run in later elections, he was busy and productive: He had earned a doctorate in politics at Oxford, had published many books, and had co-chaired the Hart-Rudman Commission, which memorably warned the incoming president in 2001, George W. Bush, to prepare for a terrorist attack on American soil. Why, Strother asked himself, should he rake up an issue that could never be resolved and might cause Hart more stress than surcease?

But late last year, Strother learned that the prostate cancer he had been treated for a dozen years ago had returned and spread, and that he might not have long to live. The cancer is now in remission, but after the diagnosis Strother began traveling to see people he had known and worked with, to say goodbye. One of his stops was Colorado, where he had a meal with Gary Hart.

Aware that this might be one of their final conversations, Hart asked Strother to think about the high points of the campaign, and its lows. Hart knew that Strother had been friends with Billy Broadhurst, the man who had taken Hart on the fateful *Monkey Business* cruise. According to Strother and others involved with the Hart campaign, Broadhurst was from that familiar political category, the campaign groupie and aspiring insider. Broadhurst kept trying to ingratiate himself with Hart, and kept being rebuffed. He was also a high-living, high-spending fixer and lobbyist with frequent money problems.

Strother talked with Hart this spring; Broadhurst had died about a year earlier. In retrospect, Hart asked, what did Strother make of the whole imbroglio?

"Ray said, 'Why do you ask?'" Hart told me, when I called to talk with him about the episode. "And I said there are a whole list of 'coincidences' that had been on my mind for 30 years, and that could lead a reasonable person to think none of it happened by accident.

"Ray replied, 'It's because you were set up. I know you were set up.'

"I asked him how he could be so certain," Hart told me. Strother then recounted his long-ago talk with Atwater, and Atwater's claim that the whole *Monkey Business*

weekend had occurred at his direction. According to Hart, that plan would have involved: contriving an invitation from Broadhurst for Hart to come on a boat ride, when Hart intended to be working on a speech. Ensuring that young women would be invited aboard. Arranging for the Broadhurst boat Hart thought he would be boarding, with some unmemorable name, to be unavailable—so that the group would have to switch to another boat, *Monkey Business*. Persuading Broadhurst to "forget" to check in with customs clearance

• BIG IN ... INDIA

Apps That Answer Your Prayers

Like Uber, but for God

BY SIGAL SAMUEL

HOW CAN I get a divine intervention for my career? That's the question Ravi Ganne, a young investment banker in Bangalore, typed into Google seven years ago. His search results led him to the website of a new company called ePuja. For about \$15, the start-up would have a *puja*, a Hindu devotional-prayer ritual, performed on his behalf at one of its many in-network temples.

A few clicks later, Ganne had arranged for a ritual at his favorite temple, dedicated to the Hindu god Vishnu and located in Tamil Nadu. "It worked out for me," he says. "I got a better job offer. So I started doing this on a regular basis."

In recent years, tens of thousands of Indians have

turned to ePuja and other prayer-by-proxy companies, whose smartphone apps and websites make summoning a godly intercession as easy as ordering a pizza. Another such company, Shubhpuja, has marketed itself as a way to "connect to God in one click." The offer appeals to Hindus—both in India and abroad—who don't have the time, money, or physical ability to travel to the temple with the best reputation for resolving their particular problem. Just select a *puja* and temple, pay a fee, and the company gets a priest to perform the ritual. Shubhpuja even allows customers to Skype into rituals as they're being performed.

ePuja's network now includes 3,600 temples, according to the company's founder, Shiva

Kumar, who spent four years driving around India persuading priests to partner with him. Explaining the concept was a challenge, he says: "They don't understand what the internet is. 'Where is this internet? Can I touch it, feel it?'" But once they grasped it, most priests were willing to perform *pujas* for anyone who wanted them.

The company has since facilitated about 50,000 *pujas* for customers in 65 countries, according to Kumar, who says one of the most common requests is for help securing a marriage. Once, however, a customer in Brazil asked for a *puja* that would guarantee a speedy divorce; Kumar suspects he wasn't Hindu. Although he's surprised to see an "unbelievable number" of non-Hindus arranging *pujas*—he estimates that they account for 20 percent of his business—he doesn't find their use of the service offensive.

The convenience offered by sites like ePuja and Shubhpuja may be their biggest selling point, but it also risks making a ritual feel less meaningful: What's a devotional experience without some effort,

at Bimini before closing time, so that the boat “unexpectedly” had to stay overnight there. And, according to Hart, organizing an opportunistic photo-grab.

“There were a lot of people on the dock, people getting off their boats and wandering up and down on the wharf,” Hart told me. “While I was waiting for Broadhurst and whatever he was working out with the customs people, I sat on this little piling on the pier.” Hart said that Donna Rice’s friend and companion on the boat, Lynn Armandt, was standing a short distance

away. “Miss Armandt made a gesture to Miss Rice, and she immediately came over and sat on my lap. Miss Armandt took the picture. The whole thing took less than five seconds, with lots of other people around. It was clearly staged, but it was used after the fact to prove that some intimacy existed.”

What are we to make of Strother’s late-in-life revelation of Atwater’s deathbed confession? Hart’s reputation, deserved or not, certainly gave Atwater something to work with, if that’s what he did. (“It

would be just like the perversity of history for someone to undertake an effort that might well have happened by itself,” Matt Bai told me when I spoke with him recently.) What would have induced Broadhurst to participate in an entrapment scheme? (When I asked Strother this question, he said, “Money.”) How exactly was the scheme supposed to work? Hart had been introduced to Donna Rice at least once before (briefly, at an event at the musician Don Henley’s house, in Colorado, that Hart attended with his wife), and he phoned her after the *Monkey Business* weekend. Both Rice and Hart denied any affair. A few people still living may know what happened that weekend, and why. (Rice, who now leads an internet-safety group called Enough Is Enough and goes by her married name, Donna Rice Hughes, did not respond to repeated requests for comment.) Most likely the rest of us never will.

LIKE OTHER POLITICAL calamities, the Hart downfall had consequences that will be debated for as long as the man’s name is remembered. History is full of unknowable “What if?” questions. What if whatever happened that weekend in Bimini had not happened? “I was going to be the next president,” Hart told me, clinically. He was, or might have been—and then he wasn’t.

If history had gone in a different direction in 1987, and Hart had become the 41st president rather than Bush, then Bill Clinton would not have had his chance in 1992, or perhaps ever. George W. Bush, who found his footing with a place on his father’s winning campaign, would probably never have emerged as a contender. When and whether Barack Obama and Donald Trump might ever have come onto the stage no one can say. “No first Bush if things had turned out differently,” Gary Hart told me. “Which means no second Bush—at least not when he arrived. Then no Iraq War. No Cheney. Who knows what else?”

In announcing the suspension of his campaign, Hart angrily said, “I believe I would have been a successful candidate. And I know I could have been a very good president, particularly for these times. But apparently now we’ll never know.”

We won’t. **A**

James Fallows is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

inconvenience, and, well, devotion? Kumar acknowledges that an in-person temple visit is better but says, “We are the second-best way.”

Hinduism’s emphasis on astrology helps explain why many people gladly resort to this suboptimal system, according to Vasudha Narayanan, a religion professor at the University of Florida. Solving a given problem, she explains, requires propitiating the right planet with the right ritual at the right temple. “If the roof caves in, it’s because Saturn is not in the right position. So what do I do about it? Go to this temple, do this

puja. But here I am in Gainesville, Florida—what am I going to do? The easiest thing is to do it by ePuja.”

Although paying for a prayer might seem crass to some non-Hindus, it’s common in India, Narayanan says. Even in-person temple visits tend to involve giving a donation to the temple or an offering to the priest who performs a ritual. Nor does it strike most Hindus as strange for the supplicant to be absent. One of Narayanan’s earliest memories of growing up in India is of her grandmother filling out mail-order forms to have

priests perform rituals at distant temples.

“I think there’s a fairly significant difference between, say, a generic Protestant idea of prayer and a generic Hindu idea,” Narayanan adds. “In the theology in India, there’s much more value given to the ritual itself.” It doesn’t matter if someone is saying a prayer for you because you paid him \$15 to do so. It matters that the prayer is being said, because the words themselves are believed to have the power to transform the universe.

Or, as Kumar says, “I am just a postman carrying your request to God.” **A**





• BUSINESS

PRIVATE INEQUITY

The number of publicly traded companies is falling. Is the little guy getting shut out of the most lucrative investments?

BY FRANK PARTNOY

ONE WEEK THIS SUMMER, the Nasdaq stock market listed five recent initial public offerings, including Sonos, the home-audio company, and Vaccinex, which makes a promising cancer drug. That same week, an investor looking at Nasdaq's Listing Center would have seen the names of 16 stocks set to disappear. The reasons for the delistings varied. Synchronoss Technologies, a software company, had failed to file financial reports since February 2017. Abaxis, a veterinary-diagnostics firm, was being acquired by Zoetis. Capella Education was merging with Strayer Education (both operate for-profit schools).

The week was representative of the past two decades. In 1997, during the dot-com boom, there were 8,884 companies listed on U.S. exchanges, primarily on Nasdaq and the New York Stock Exchange. Since then, the number has been cut by more than half. The pace of decline has been gradual, unaffected by the dot-com bust, the financial crisis, or subsequent recoveries. A two-decade chart showing the number of public companies looks like a slide at a children's playground, slowly but surely going down.

Should we be concerned? Stock-exchange officials certainly are. Last year, Thomas Farley, then the head of the NYSE

Group, said the drop "may severely limit opportunities for economic growth, hiring, and wealth creation." Earlier this year, in her introduction to a white paper, Nasdaq's CEO, Adena Friedman, warned that if the trend continues, "job creation and economic growth could suffer, and income inequality could worsen as average investors become increasingly shut out of the most attractive offerings."

Of course, Farley and Friedman have a financial stake in the health of the exchanges. But there is a broader logic to their professed concerns. Traditionally, promising young companies turned to the public markets to raise capital in order to expand their operations; this gave individual investors a shot at owning a piece of those companies' hoped-for success, either by buying their stocks directly or, more commonly, by holding them in a mutual fund or index fund. Today, more and more start-up companies secure funding from private investors, cutting most Americans out of the equation.

Robert J. Jackson Jr., a commissioner of the Securities and Exchange Commission who previously worked at Bear Stearns underwriting IPOs, told me there can be real distributive consequences when the highest-growth companies are private. If many of the economy's greatest success stories aren't included in the funds that ordinary Americans hold, only the wealthiest members of society will enjoy the gains, intensifying inequality. "It's a good enough argument for me to care about wanting more companies to be public," Jackson said. SEC Chair Jay Clayton agrees. In his first major speech, he warned: "The potential lasting effects of such an outcome to the economy and society are, in two words, *not good*."

THE INITIAL PUBLIC OFFERING was once the ultimate marker of start-up success. Founders of a company might get their idea off the ground by asking family members and friends for seed money, then turn to angel funders, venture capitalists, and private-equity investors to keep the lights on during the fledgling years. But the goal was typically an IPO. Historically, private investors have been willing to risk only relatively small amounts with any one company, and they have tended to exit any investment within a few years. The IPO gave a thriving company a base of capital and

announced to the world that it had arrived. Throughout the 20th century, one of the most revered symbols of a mature business was the framed ceremonial gavel its managers had used to ring the New York Stock Exchange bell.

An IPO is still the best means for many companies to obtain liquidity; selling shares on a public exchange remains easier and cheaper than in the private markets. But staying private has, for a variety of reasons, become more alluring than it used to be.

Going public is expensive. Investment bankers, lawyers, and auditors collectively charge millions of dollars to prepare the lengthy registration statement that must be filed with the SEC before shares can be sold. And that's just the beginning. It costs millions more to comply with ongoing-disclosure requirements. Public companies also incur the harder-to-quantify costs of opening their books to the scrutiny of securities analysts, activist investors, the media, and short sellers. Equitable

The shrinking of public markets has undoubtedly altered the playing field for average investors.

Financial, a Nebraska bank operator that delisted from Nasdaq this summer, said it was doing so in order “to eliminate the administrative and annual fees associated with being listed on Nasdaq.”

The steady deregulation of private markets is at least as important a factor as the high costs of going—and staying—public. For decades, because of securities laws passed in the wake of the Great Depression, firms could raise only small amounts of money without triggering public-reporting requirements. But the National Securities Markets Improvement Act of 1996 made it easier for private companies to sell stock to “qualified purchasers,” meaning large institutions and wealthy investors. In 2012, Congress increased the allowed number of investors in large private firms from 500 to 2,000. The SEC, meanwhile, adopted rules that encouraged “private

placements,” which permitted private firms to raise millions of dollars while avoiding public reporting. Today, some in Congress and at the SEC fret about the size and influence of private markets, but they are at least partly responsible for those markets' rapid growth.

Private assets under management totaled less than \$1 trillion in 2000; they surpassed \$5 trillion last year. In this climate, many companies no longer need an IPO to raise capital. When a handful of start-ups recently began putting rental scooters and bikes at strategic points in urban areas, the idea quickly spread, and hundreds of millions of dollars of private money soon followed. Bird, Lime, and Spin didn't need an IPO; there was plenty of private cash to go around.

THE SHRINKING OF public markets has undoubtedly altered the playing field for average investors, but it is important to be precise about how. The total *number* of public companies is much lower today than during the 1990s, but the total *value* of public companies has increased. Jay Ritter, a finance professor at the University of Florida, is widely regarded as the leading scholar studying IPOs. When I asked him about the sharp decline in public companies, he was surprisingly sanguine. Rit-

ter isn't especially concerned about the growth of private markets, or even the decline in IPOs. Instead, he says the most significant change is that both public and private companies are bigger, mainly because technology is reducing costs and creating incentives to scale.

Consider Alphabet, Google's parent company, which has spent tens of billions of dollars buying hundreds of other companies, sometimes at a rate of one acquisition a week. Before the 1990s, many of these acquired companies—Android, Waze, YouTube—would have gone public on their own rather than accepting an offer from an industry giant. But today almost 90 percent of venture-capital-backed firms seek to be acquired. In this sense, publicly traded companies aren't really disappearing; they are consolidating. The phenomenon isn't limited to the tech giants; other large public companies,

including Anheuser-Busch InBev, General Electric, and Procter & Gamble, are also growing larger and more acquisitive. Coca-Cola has spent billions buying a range of businesses recently, including Costa Coffee, the U.K.-based chain, and several Latin American beverage sellers.

What does it mean for the average investor to own bigger stocks? Instead of buying stock in a collection of separate public companies, when you buy a share of Alphabet or Coca-Cola, you get many businesses wrapped up in one big package. You can't always get detailed information about the performance of subsidiaries and divisions; if you own shares in those big companies, you just have to hope that the component parts are profitable and that their profits flow through to the parent company's bottom line.

Still, buying big public companies is becoming a sure way to buy lots of small private ones. Many large public companies—including Intel, Johnson & Johnson, and Time Warner—have divisions that are explicitly tasked with investing in and sometimes acquiring private companies (some invest in public companies, too). When SoftBank Group, a Japanese conglomerate, created its Vision Fund last year to invest in technology companies, both private and public, some of the fund's \$100 billion came from Apple and Qualcomm.

All of this consolidation does pose challenges for investors. Traditionally, small stocks have delivered both higher risk and higher returns; if you own shares in an index fund, consolidation means you have less exposure to small stocks than in the past. If you want that exposure, you probably need to rejigger which funds you own. An SEC rule permits mutual funds to invest up to 15 percent of their assets in private companies, and more are doing so, although most actively traded funds remain below that limit. As of July, the 12th-largest investment in the \$25 billion-plus Fidelity Blue Chip Growth Fund—behind Tesla and Home Depot but ahead of Mastercard and Netflix—was a \$438 million stake in Juul, the private company behind the wildly popular vaping device.

THE WAYS IN WHICH average investors can participate in the private market are imperfect. Unless you are very wealthy or well connected, you

probably are not going to be buying into the leading venture-capital funds, such as Andreessen Horowitz and Sequoia Capital. We should be wary, however, of accepting a romantic notion of the past in which Wall Street was a level playing field for individual investors. When I was at Morgan Stanley in the 1990s, the bank's senior employees had special access to a private-equity partnership called Princes Gate, which made early-stage investments in companies like Au Bon Pain and Cannondale and generated 30 percent-plus annual returns. Average investors were not invited. The markets have always been split, in some ways, between haves and have-nots.

As for public markets, there are responsible ways to encourage small-company IPOs. In July, lawmakers in the House of Representatives introduced a proposal to study the problem of high IPO fees for companies with less than \$1 billion in revenue. Bigger companies can negotiate lower underwriting fees; Facebook, for instance, paid a 1.1 percent fee, whereas most smaller companies pay 7 percent. SEC Commissioner Jackson labels these high fees a "middle-market tax," which deters small and midsize companies from going public. He's called on investment bankers to price IPO fees more competitively. "We'll be watching," he told me.

But let's not fall back into the trap of viewing an IPO as good in and of itself. IPOs are often poor investments; one reason we see fewer of them today is that many investors were burned by dot-com companies that promised riches and then collapsed.

It's a lesson worth remembering, even as the action in the economy continues its shift from public to private markets. In late August, Jay Clayton announced that the SEC was working on adjusting the current rules to make it easier for average investors to take part in private investment. But the existing barriers were put in place for a reason: They make it harder for closely held companies to take advantage of unsophisticated investors. Before buying a piece of that private purveyor of celery soda, consider an alternative that might give you similar exposure, and less risk: a good old-fashioned share of Coca-Cola. **A**

Frank Partnoy is a law professor at UC Berkeley.

• STUDY OF STUDIES

The Science of Sibling Rivalry

Your brother or sister could be the best thing that ever happened to you—or the worst.

BY BEN HEALY

WE DON'T CHOOSE our siblings the way we choose our partners and friends. Of course, we don't choose our parents either, but they usually make that up to us by sustaining us on the way to adulthood. Brothers and sisters are just sort of *there*. And yet, when it comes to our development, they can be more influential than parents. This holds whether they are older and cool, or younger and frustrating; whether we follow in their footsteps, or run screaming in the other direction.

Part of siblings' sway has to do with their sheer presence. Eighty-two percent of kids live with a sibling **[1]** (a greater share than live with a father), and about 75 percent of 70-year-olds have a living sibling. **[2]** For those of us who have brothers or sisters, our relationships with them will likely be the longest of our life.

Whether these relationships make our life better or worse is a more complicated question. On the upside, positive interactions with siblings during adolescence

foster empathy, prosocial behavior, and academic achievement. **[1]** This effect can be complicated by a full house, however. Kids with more siblings (a larger "sibship," to use the industry term) do worse in school **[3]**—although the universality of this finding has been challenged by studies of Mormons **[4]** and the entire population of Norway. **[5]**

When a sibling relationship is bad, however, it can be *really* bad—as in messing-up-your-life bad. Tense sibling relationships make people more likely to use substances and to be depressed and anxious in adolescence. **[1]** Moreover, sibling bullying makes a kid more likely to engage in self-harm as a teen **[6]** and to become psychotic by age 18. **[7]**

Whether a person models herself after



THE STUDIES:

[1] McHale et al., "Sibling Relationships and Influences in Childhood and Adolescence" (*Journal of Marriage and Family*, Oct. 2012)
[2] Richard A. Settersten Jr., "Social Relationships in the New Demographic Regime" (*Advances in Life Course Research*, 2007)
[3] Steelman et al.,

"Reconsidering the Effects of Sibling Configuration" (*Annual Review of Sociology*, 2002)
[4] Douglas B. Downey, "Number of Siblings and Intellectual Development" (*American Psychologist*, June/July 2001)
[5] Black et al., "The More the Merrier?" (*Quarterly Journal of Economics*, May 2005)
[6] Bowes et al., "Sibling Bullying and the Risk of Depression,

Anxiety, and Self-Harm" (*Pediatrics*, Sept. 2014)
[7] Dantchev et al., "Sibling Bullying in Middle Childhood and Psychotic Disorder at 18 Years" (*Psychological Medicine*, Oct. 2018)
[8] Sun et al., "Sibling Experiences in Middle Childhood Predict Sibling Differences in College Graduation" (*Child Development*, forthcoming)

[9] Feinberg et al., "Sibling Differentiation" (*Child Development*, Sept./Oct. 2003)
[10] Rodgers et al., "Sibling Differences in Adolescent Sexual Behavior" (*Journal of Marriage and Family*, Feb. 1992)
[11] Rostila et al., "Mortality From Myocardial Infarction After the Death of a Sibling" (*Journal of the American Heart Association*, Feb. 2013)

her siblings or tries to distinguish herself has particularly important consequences. One study found that siblings who felt positively about each other tended to achieve similar education levels, while those who spent unequal time with their dad and perceived unequal parental treatment had diverging educational fortunes. **[8]** Not that divergence is necessarily bad: Research suggests that as siblings' relationships with their parents grow more different over time, their relationship with each other may become warmer. **[9]** And emulating your sibling can be a mistake, depending on what she's up to: Girls are more likely to get pregnant in their teens and teenagers are more likely to engage in risky behavior if an older sibling did so first. **[1]** Younger siblings also may have sex earlier than older ones (partly because their big brothers and sisters introduce them to more experienced potential partners). **[10]**

One way or another, sibling influence is lasting. A study of more than 1 million Swedes found that one's risk of dying of a heart attack spikes after a sibling dies of one, due not only to shared DNA but also to the stress of losing such a key figure. **[11]** Which makes sense: Most of us are different people than we'd have been if our brothers or sisters were never born. Siblings seem like they're just *there* only until they aren't. **A**

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THE CULTURE FILE

BOOKS, ARTS, AND ENTERTAINMENT

THE OMNIVORE

The Eternal Sunshine of Paul McCartney

Now 76, with a new album, the pop legend may have made more people happy than any other artist.

BY JAMES PARKER

DOES EVERYONE already know the story of Paul McCartney and the milkman? I think I only just heard it, although at the same time it feels like a story I was told long ago, magical-indelible, back in the wavy chambers of my childhood. It goes like this: Paul McCartney, vital young Beatle, is lying in bed one morning in 1963 when he hears the milkman making his rounds. The milk bottles are clinking and clanking, doorstep to doorstep, and the milkman is whistling,



as milkmen will. And what he's whistling is the Beatles' new single, "From Me to You." *Da da da, da da dum dum da*. The pop star sinks back into his pillow, into his morning-warm mattress, vibrating head to toe with a nice horizontal buzz of gratification. He knows he's cracked the code.

Very McCartney, that story—trite, profound, and instantly folkloric. The sound of a milkman's whistle is proverbially mindless, the mere absent tootling of a city yawning awake. Yet how meaningful it is: McCartney's song, sent out into the world, is being returned to him, pearl-like, on a ripple of the working-class unconscious. *In Penny Lane there is a milkman whistling Beatles songs...*

Sir Paul McCartney is 76 years old, and currently on a world tour to promote his new album, *Egypt Station*. "He can't stop working or he'll die," I was recently assured over email by a friend who is the most passionate McCartney fan I know. "Also he plays the piano like a percussion instrument." There he is, an automaton of his own vast gifts, thumping away at the keys. The first song on *Egypt Station* is "I Don't Know": lovely, trudging, Beatle-doleful piano, and McCartney singing in a voice striated with age. *I got crows at my window / Dogs at my door / I don't think I can take any more*. The song is a dialogue between this figure—this small, embattled Paul, besieged by omens—and the supernaturally consoling presence that appears before him in the chorus. *It's all right, sleep tight / I will take the strain / You're fine / Love of mine / You will feel no pain*. This is a presence that we recognize from "Let It Be," although the suggestion of

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anesthesia is new. Is it Mother Mary, or is it Morpheus, easeful death?

McCartney may have made more people happy—gapingly, tinglingly, mind-cancelingly happy—than any other artist, alive or dead. W. H. Auden wrote, *In headaches and in worry / Vaguely life leaks away*. Paul McCartney has been the opposite of that. The rush of early Beatles; the towering artistic magnanimity of middle-period Beatles; the epic fragmentations of late Beatles; and his solo songbook, which sometimes feels like a wild succession of one-hit wonders, of brilliant, bulbous, unrelated novelties—in every phase, in every style, he has insisted that we not allow our lives to leak away. His scope is immense. Think for a second about *Revolver*, and try to hold in your head the idea that the Larkin-esque elegist who wrote “Eleanor Rigby”—that rhapsody of glumness, that death-of-God song—is also the man playing bass on “And Your Bird Can Sing,” with a technique as restless and fiery-fingered as The Who’s John Entwistle’s but with an extra dimension of melodic bounteousness and buoyancy, of pure, generative tune-energy. (I just listened to it again, and burst out laughing.)

“Penny Lane” is the perfect summation, in a way: a trippily colorized vision of everyday life as a harmonic whole, a sublime congruity or comedy, a humming, sanctified circuit in which the brass-band trumpeter sounds like Bach and the fireman keeps a portrait of the Queen in his pocket. If you watched McCartney recently on James Corden’s “Carpool Karaoke,” doing a nostalgia tour of Liverpool with his host blushing and chirping at the wheel, you’ll have seen how people—young, old, of every shape and color—respond to him. He travels in a pocket universe of delight. You’ll also have seen him carefully adding his signature to the scuffed, graffitied street sign of the real Penny Lane: signing it like an artist signs his creation.

“Poetry reveals language’s underlying metrical and intonational regularity, and its tendency to pattern its sounds,” the Scottish poet and musician Don Paterson writes in his new book, *The Poem*. Poetry does that, and so does Paul McCartney. He can’t help himself. *Swaying daisies sing a lazy song beneath the sun*. That’s from 1968’s “Mother Nature’s Son,” perhaps the single most pristine utterance of McCartney’s muse in his whole corpus. The softly dulled guitar-chime, the foot-tap and the lulling rhyme, the sleepy delivery: *Find me in my field of grass / Mother Nature’s son*. This is not 20th-century music. It has nothing to do with sex, politics, the trapped self, or the long chore of consciousness. This is pre-modern, pre-adult, pre-gravity. It runs straight back to the first climates of the imagination, to the place where William Blake wrote his *Songs of Innocence*: *Piping down the valleys wild / Piping songs of pleasant glee / On a cloud I saw a child*.

**“Penny Lane”
is the perfect
summation:
everyday
life as a har-
monic whole.**

And then, from the same era and acoustic realm, there’s “Blackbird,” shimmering in the predawn: *Take these broken wings and learn to fly*. For me this is McCartney self-soothing in the face of the Beatles’ meltdown, the impending bummer of individuation. It was from the *White Album* sessions, after all—everybody writing his own songs, grumpy, with Yoko Ono sitting harbingerlike in the studio, a carved, impassive face in a cavern of hair. So what’s a sad but incorrigibly optimistic bandleader to do, if not direct himself right into the dark, into the lustrousness, into the deep blackbird-feather gleam of promise? *Blackbird, fly / Blackbird, fly / Into the light of the dark black night*. (Limpid squirtings of actual blackbird-song conclude the track, the bird as compulsive a melodist as McCartney himself.)

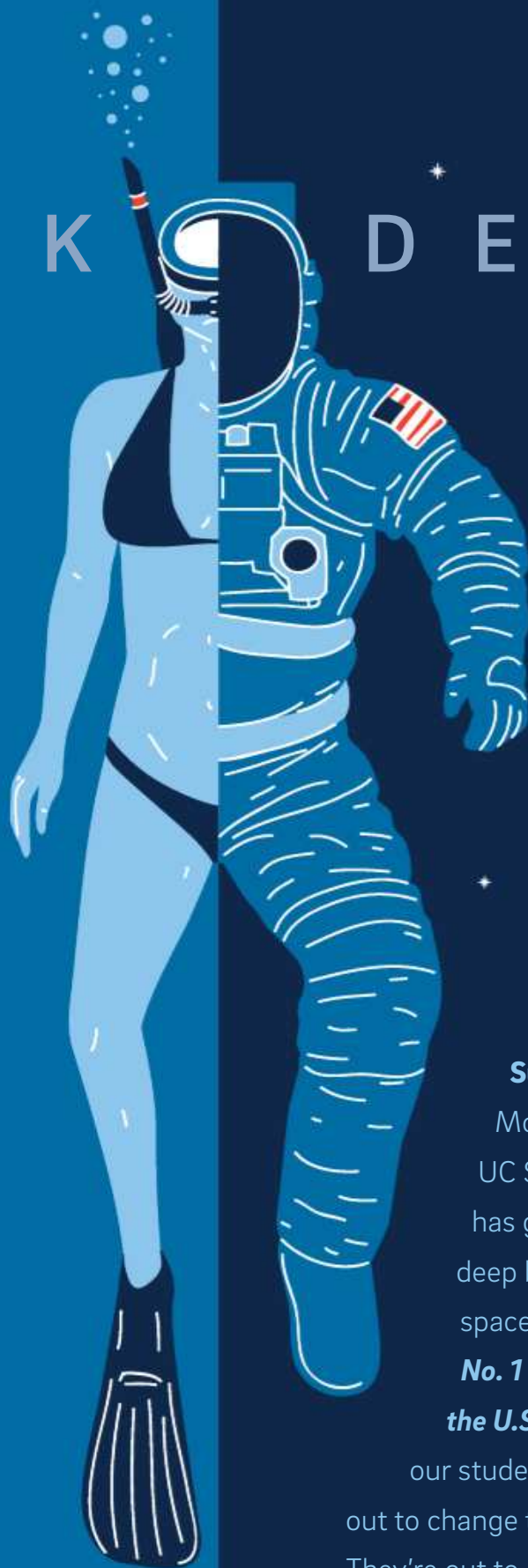
Biography supplies the platitudes: how the loss of his mother when he was 14, and the subsequent need to make the best of things, produced the hard shell of perkiness. Post-Beatles, freed or cut off from the drug-drag and the sourly twanging intellect of John Lennon, what happened to his talent? By one account, it accelerated into nonsense: form without content, songs about nothing but the fact that they were songs. But that’s not quite right. I was 9 when “Mull of Kintyre” came out, in 1977, and though I’m not from Scotland, I recognized it immediately as my birthright, a song of my blood, the only possible way to sing about this hitherto uncelebrated peninsula, Kintyre. Oh, the bagpipes. Oh, the drums! (In the U.S., interestingly, this song did nothing. In the U.K., at the top of the charts, it dueled titanically with two of the mightiest singles ever released: Queen’s “We Are the Champions” and Abba’s “The Name of the Game.”)

And what about the thundering emotional nudism of “Maybe I’m Amazed,” the least macho love song ever? *Maybe I’m amazed at the way you love me all the time / Maybe I’m afraid of the way I love you*. To be amazed and afraid—a biblical echo can be heard in there, from somewhere deep in McCartney’s Liverpool-Catholic wiring. Mark 10:32: “And Jesus went before them: and they were amazed; and as they followed, they were afraid.”

“Love you, Paul,” says a shaven-headed man on “Carpool Karaoke,” outside the pre-Beatles McCartney-family home on Forthlin Road. He says it with easy Liverpoolian warmth, but also with a degree of urgency. Because it’s important that McCartney knows this. Let us not be afraid of the way we love him. For more than 50 years he’s been making us happy, giving us comfort, a genius who scoops tunes out of the air with his hands. It’s the milkman’s whistle, it’s the music of the spheres. From him to us, and back again. *Da da da, da da dum dum da.* **A**

James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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BOOKS

Barbara Kingsolver's Liberal Pabulum

Tackling the Trump era, she brings us the American-family novel as Sunday talk show—all sound bite, no depth.

BY MERVE EMRE

UNSHELTERED, BY BARBARA KINGSOLVER, is about a middle-class family struggling to make ends meet as the 2016 presidential primaries unfold. “One underemployed breadwinner, five dependents,” Kingsolver writes of the Knox-Tavoularis family, whose members are designed to represent variously aggrieved members of the white American electorate. At the center of the novel is Willa, a magazine editor turned freelance writer. In her orbit are her husband, Iano, a tenure-track professor turned adjunct instructor; her son, Zeke, a Harvard graduate turned unemployed single father; her daughter, Tig, a Millennial loner turned leftist organizer; her dying father-in-law, Nick, a blue-collar worker turned Trump supporter; and Zeke’s infant son, Dusty, heir to a doomed future.

The novel, Kingsolver’s eighth, chronicles Willa’s attempt to save her dead aunt’s house, a crumbling Victorian mansion in Vineland, New Jersey. An (actual) old Temperance town whose soil once made it attractive to glass-makers and chicken farmers and the founders of Welch’s Grape Juice, Vineland lost its *raison d’être* after a line of pesticide manufacturers poisoned

the land and fled, along with many of the town’s jobs and a noticeable portion of its white people. The Knox-Tavoularis family has since inherited the house, and Willa sees signs of Vineland’s decline everywhere. When she glances at the yard of her neighbor Jorge, she sees a “vehicle boneyard” and hears “intermittent Spanish expletives of frustration or success” as the boys next door tinker with abandoned cars. Young mothers pass her on the sidewalk “conversing in a musical Asian language.” Her daily walk takes her past “a pawn shop, the welfare office, a Thai restaurant, and the Number One Chinese Market.” She thinks that if she had to pitch an article about the town, its headline would read: “Nineteenth-Century Utopias Gone to Hell.”

If Vineland is supposed to be a microcosm of the United States in 2016, then the house is an excuse for Kingsolver to cram five people with disparate political allegiances under one leaky roof. Family dinners are exhausting opportunities to rehearse the major fault lines in mainstream American politics. Willa wonders why it seems like “there’s less money in the world than there used to be.” Iano bemoans his lack of job security, blaming his failed tenure bids on jealous colleagues and rumors of affairs with students. “Boundaries, everybody keeps saying this word and I never get it,” he complains. Zeke and Tig bicker about finance capital and ecocide, volleying clichés at each other while Willa watches, bemused, and Iano submits clarifying comments. “Grow or die, that’s just the law of our economy, Tiggo,” Zeke says. “There’s no more room to grow,” Tig snaps back. “Supply and demand,” offers Iano, who we are supposed to believe has a doctorate in global politics. Nick mutters racist epithets and rails against Obamacare. The baby puts things in his mouth and cries. This is





the American-family novel as Sunday-morning talk show—a character drama with no real characters, only sound bites masquerading as human beings.

The first American novel to treat the 2016 election at length, *Unsheltered* is stuffed with recognizable people, events, and issues: Donald Trump (whom Kingsolver never refers to by name but calls “the Bullhorn”), Bernie Sanders (whose supporters are “multicolored, wildly groomed, and ready to rock”), the 2008 financial crisis, Occupy Wall Street, student debt, the gig economy, immigration, global warming. The novel seems to know that we exist in a state of desperate inequality and looming environmental catastrophe from which there is no obvious escape. Yet, also like a Sunday-morning talk show, *Unsheltered* is so busy flaunting its timeliness that it misses the underlying political and economic strains that have brought the country to this pass. “Today’s problems can’t be solved by today’s people,” Tig warns her mother, who cannot quite absorb the lesson. Shocked and injured by her lack of middle-class comforts, Willa is allergic to probing the foundations of wealth and power, and the way they shape people’s fates.

She shares this sensibility with Kingsolver, who is often described as a “political novelist” but who has only the shallowest understanding of political reality. Her novels specialize in self-congratulatory gestures of empathy: the clumsy representation of characters whom she finds obviously distasteful but wants to redeem, modeling the respect and understanding that she believes can open our hearts and minds and subdue our partisan acrimony. The result is not a bad novel—it is perfectly competent at the level of the sentence—but a novel that fails so dramatically to capture the corrosive realities of liberal capitalism that it just might deflate, once and for all, the middlebrow fantasy that stories can help us get through these dark times.

THE DARK TIMES began for Kingsolver in 2012, the year Barack Obama was reelected and Donald Trump filed a trademark application for “Make America Great Again.” Kingsolver had just published her latest novel, *Flight Behavior*, the story of a poor, religious woman forced to confront the science of climate change. On the hunt for her next project, Kingsolver began to entertain a “vague feeling the world as we knew it was ending. Soon the feeling was no longer vague,” she writes in a prefatory letter addressed to the reader of *Unsheltered*.

Shocking new leadership styles were ascendant, fueled by fear and polarization. Things we’ve always counted on were falling apart: civil governance, generous patriotism, a secure pension at the end of a life’s work. That the poles would stay frozen.

Family dinners are exhausting opportunities to rehearse the major fault lines in mainstream American politics.

The “we” whom Kingsolver addresses in her letter are not just any readers but the members of her socially conscious fan base: readers for whom there existed, until recently, a shared condition of political and economic stability that all of us could count on to protect our interests. For these readers, as for Kingsolver, the unceremonious arrival of Donald Trump represented not just an erosion of the norms of civility. It was a world-historical event, a harbinger of the apocalypse.

As far as accounts of the world’s end go, this one is pretty shortsighted. American politics have become more strident, and inequities more apparent, but the fissures have been spreading and deepening over the past half century. As the critic Lee Siegel observed in 1999, a decade into Kingsolver’s career as a novelist she already betrayed an irritating tendency to flatten her representations of complex political entanglements into occasions to broadcast her moral concern—virtue signaling *avant la lettre*. The feuding Nicaraguans in *Animal Dreams* (1990), Sandinistas and Contras alike, were all “plain, earnest people” trying to find “peace and a kinder way of life.” The Congo of *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998) was not a site of brutal colonial exploitation but a “place of wonders” that encouraged Kingsolver to explore “the great, shifting terrain between righteousness and what is right.” Kingsolver begins *Unsheltered* by emphasizing the risk she has taken in writing about the present: “It’s impossible to understand a crisis when you’re standing inside it, but good art comes from risking the impossible, so I thought I’d try.”

The responsibility for explaining the crisis falls to Kingsolver’s characters, who take turns perorating about stagnant wages, student loans, white nationalism, “the historical moment of no more free lunch.” *Unsheltered*’s third-person narrator sticks closest to Willa, who prides herself on her ability to navigate among Iano’s resignation, Tig’s “batshit hopes,” Zeke’s capitalist can-do spirit, Nick’s bigotry, and her own astute perception of her friends and neighbors. Here she is on her neighbor Jorge and his brother:

She had no hard feelings ... toward these handsome boys and their friends, who all wore athletic shorts and plastic bath shoes as if life began in a locker room.

On her Italian contractor:

He pronounced [almond] *owl-mond*. She also noted his resistance to contractions, and the recurrent *back inna day*. She wished for her pocket tape recorder.

On one of Iano’s students, a young girl who shows up at the house, sick and weepy, intimating that she has had an affair with Iano:



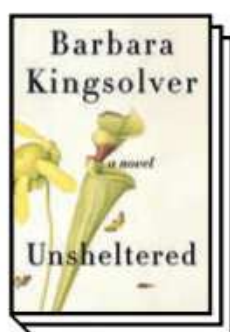
She wiped her runny nose, then fiddled with the steel eyebrow ring, then wiped her nose again, all of which made Willa wince. Even if she'd had doubts about Iano ... it was not going to be this one. Iano was a stickler for hygiene.

If Kingsolver intends to carve out some ironic distance between her narrative voice and Willa's consciousness, it is very hard to gauge: Willa's cluelessness, a little bit racist and a little bit sexist, seems to merit at most a laugh or a shrug, while the prejudice of characters like Nick is softened, defanged by his old age and feebleness. Sometimes Willa seems to be a mouthpiece for Kingsolver, so precisely does she echo her insulated view of political reality. "It was pretty clear there would be no stopping the Bullhorn, or someone like him," Willa thinks near the close of the primaries. "Here was the earthquake, the fire, flood, and melting permafrost." At other times Willa seems to represent Kingsolver's idea of what middle-class Americans are really like: casually bigoted, painfully smug, and limited in their imaginative capabilities.

WHAT *UNSHELTERED* LACKS in political understanding, it tries to compensate for through historical analogy. The story of the Knox-Tavoularis family is interwoven, in alternating chapters, with the 19th-century tale of Thatcher Greenwood and Mary Treat: Vineland neighbors, amateur scientists, and passionate defenders of the ideas of Charles Darwin against the religious demagoguery of Vineland's founder, Charles Landis. Thatcher and Mary spend their time together observing flora and fauna, each admiring the other's intellect and equanimity. And they complain about Landis, a venal, cultish, fear-mongering leader who literally shoots someone in broad daylight—Uri Carruth, the publisher of Vineland's only oppositional newspaper—without losing any of his followers. They fear that Landis will corrupt their American utopia, that it will "ravel at the seams and show itself as a costume covered in naked greed."

Kingsolver draws the parallels between the past and the present with a heavy hand. The closing phrase of each chapter serves as the title of the chapter that follows. Willa and her family live in the same house that Thatcher owned 150 years earlier, while the house next door, once Mary Treat's, is now owned by Jorge. In the hope that her house might qualify as a historical landmark, Willa starts researching Thatcher and Mary and discovers in their letters a self-assured model of 19th-century liberalism. Thatcher and Mary are democrats, secularists, empiricists, indignant crusaders for the freedoms of speech and the press, worshippers of nature's green solitude. They, too, are not characters. They are nostalgic projections of a time when

We are foolhardy to think we can change our political and social ecosystem, Kingsolver suggests.



UNSHELTERED
BARBARA KINGSOLVER
Harper

rationality, individuality, moderation, and open-mindedness (not to mention segregation, partial suffrage, and limited indoor plumbing) made progress seem possible. "Mary had been free to examine the world as she saw it," the narrator says, evoking Willa's bliss as she "burrowed into that freedom." Only the resurrection of a liberalism that is pure at heart, undiluted by radical energies, can shelter us from the present.

To transmit this message, Kingsolver must domesticate Tig, whose gentle iconoclasm makes her Kingsolver's most multidimensional character. At the end of the novel, Tig, who has fallen in love with Jorge, gives up on her dreams of socialist revolution and settles for a more modest future. She and Jorge assume guardianship of Dusty and move into Mary Treat's carriage house, where Tig is determined to be "a different kind of mom" from Willa. Tig plants a garden, makes Dusty's baby food by hand, swaddles him in cloth diapers, and fashions his toys out of recycled containers.

"Tig and Jorge are shacking up in Mary Treat's garage. Is this significant?" Iano asks Willa, but the question is really directed at Kingsolver's readers, who are prompted to draw certain obvious conclusions: that their children are our future; that political disasters should inspire us to double down on personal responsibility; that the family of the future will be a multiethnic, financially and ecologically responsible gathering of young creatives. We are foolhardy to think we can change our political and social ecosystem, Kingsolver suggests. Like Darwin's finches, we can only adapt to it, evolve with it, continue to reproduce under its auspices, until the day we are all underwater.

What is depressing about the ending, and what makes the novel feel so curiously dated, is that Kingsolver does not seem to realize that a version of the future she imagines is already here—that it has taken root since the dismantling of the American welfare state began in the 1970s, leaving the family ever more isolated in the struggle to feed, clothe, and shelter children. The ethos of personal responsibility and the ideal of domestic self-sufficiency that Kingsolver presents as Tig's innovative response to economic precariousness and ecological disaster is 1980s neoliberal family values disguised as present-day do-it-yourself liberation. Despite the relentless contemporaneity of *Unsheltered*'s proper names and its ripped-from-the-headlines plot points, the novel's present is already our history, its future our recent past. It does not touch our current predicament. **A**

Merve Emre is an associate professor of English at the University of Oxford. She is the author, most recently, of The Personality Brokers: The Strange History of Myers-Briggs and the Birth of Personality Testing.

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BOOKS

The Personal Cost of Black Success

Two men chronicle their rise into the meritocratic elite, exposing pernicious myths and brutal realities along the way.

BY CHRISTOPHER J. LEBRON

NEW ENGLAND WINTERS are brutal affairs, with dry, driving winds that lash at those walking from here to there. On this night, but not just this one, anyone who spied me exiting one of Central Square's liquor stores near the MIT campus with a large brown bag might well have thought that I had found some graduate-school comrades with whom to spend an evening, warming ourselves from the inside out with cheap alcohol. But it was all for me.

I returned to my grad-student apartment near campus and entered my bedroom, with its extra-long twin bed across from a wooden desk. I closed the door and got busy. One wine cooler, another, some straight swigs of whiskey, and there it was: release—a numbness leading to a drowsiness that would end the evening in dead-to-the-world sleep. The trouble with sleep, though, is that it is a pause button, not an undo button. Awake, I faced again the crushing loneliness that hit me the first year of my doctorate program in political science. It wasn't just that I was the only black person in almost every room I entered. What hollowed me



out was the feeling that I couldn't connect with others in a way that made sense, certain as I was that they were tap-tap-tapping their feet—waiting for me to show how the hell I'd made it into the room in the first place, all the way from the Lower East Side of Manhattan and a family with a history of unemployment benefits and food stamps.

This is not a story I've shared publicly before. Where I come from in America, the vulgar edict "Fuck your feelings" holds an ethical status on par with that of the Bible's Golden Rule. I would probably never have shared it if not for the time I have spent with two stunningly honest memoirs that demand a reader's unflinching attention. Kiese Laymon and Casey Gerald made it into elite university rooms, all the way from poverty in the ever-present shadow of violence, and their pages are propelled, as Laymon writes in *Heavy*, by a "desire to reckon with the weight of where we've been"—to stop "paying for white folks' feelings with a generic smile and manufactured excellence they could not give one fuck about," in the parlance of his 17-year-old self.

Laymon, now 44, grew up in Jackson, Mississippi, with a single mother, a college teacher often barely able to cover the bills, whose preferred

THE CULTURE FILE

BOOKS



brand of love had a way of slipping into the too-tough sort. Struggling early on with a heavy body—physically coping with the social weight of being young, black, and poor in America—Laymon went on to finish college at Oberlin, and after teaching at Vassar, he became a professor of English and creative writing at the University of Mississippi. Gerald, who saw his family crumble during his youth in inner-city Dallas, ended up at Yale in 2005 and later went to Harvard Business School. Along the way, he heard again and again, "Casey, you are the embodiment of the American Dream!" from white liberals eager (as their predecessors had been with James Baldwin) to congratulate themselves on such a striking rise. Instead of continuing to smile and say thank you as he did for so many years, he has written *There Will Be No Miracles Here*. Both books take on the important work of exposing the damage done to America, especially its black population, by the failure to confront the myths, half-truths, and lies at the foundation of the success stories that the nation worships. In the process, Laymon and Gerald dramatize a very different route to victory: the quest to forge a self by speaking hard truths, resisting exploitation, and absorbing with grace the cost of being black in America while struggling to live a life of virtue.

"Unacknowledged scars accumulated in battles won often hurt more than battles lost."

WHITE FOLKS—conservative and liberal—have been collectively writing the American Memoir for centuries. It is the story of a nation dedicated to the accrual of personal responsibility for one's actions and choices. In this story, institutions dispassionately assess citizens as they make their way through them, and in the end, each gets what he or she deserves. Every success story releases the victor from the yoke of history. Every story of failure collapses a universe of unbidden circumstances into an insignificant mote that could have been, but wasn't, blown away by the winds of personal effort. Undergirding this paean to individual triumphalism is a vision of America as a country that the white Founding Fathers built all by their lonesome, bequeathing their heroic upstart ethic to all of us, no matter what color body we inhabit.

Mostly, the American Memoir is a lie. Black and brown folks know it is. But awareness alone doesn't diminish the power that the nation's tall tale exerts over all of us, demanding even greater heroics from outsiders with far fewer advantages. Why, Laymon and Gerald both ask, are people of color who get the chance to go far—and those back home who urge us on—so intent on declaring that we are not defined by our circumstances? That leaves us, as Gerald puts it, being "so defined by *running* from them that we don't understand what they mean, what they did and are still doing to shape the way we see and move through the world." Laymon, too, knows





the reflex to “run, deflect, and duck,” he writes, and also the challenge to deliver on his mother’s demands that he “strive for excellence, education, and accountability”—her prescription “for keeping the insides of black boys in Mississippi healthy and safe from white folk.” What proves harder to learn is how to tell “the stories my body told me”—confusing stories about black fears, joys, dangers, hungers that he comes to feel compelled to try to capture honestly.

Laymon’s and Gerald’s journeys through black youth follow a similar pattern, vividly different though their paths are. Each man is acutely aware of the important role black women have played in America and of how much he has relied on, as Gerald puts it, “what women—kin and stranger—have done for me since I was born: [seen] me wandering through the world and grabbed me by the wrist to say *C’m on here, boy*.” Mothers and grandmothers in particular are at the heart of these memoirs—embattled, unpredictable mothers who enrage their sons yet also demand that they make it to manhood, and grandmothers whose constancy in the face of turmoil is crucial. But Laymon and Gerald refuse to trace a formulaic arc, whether of family dysfunction passed down or of children surging ahead and guaranteeing hope to those left behind.

Instead their accounts explore, in Gerald’s words, “the incredible price that must be paid to be free,” generation after generation, in a nation whose success story is built on a bedrock of anti-blackness that has been airbrushed out. Laymon, who has written his memoir in the form of a letter to his mother, has gleaned from her and his grandmother how hard facing up to the full price can be if you’re always “hungry for black wins, regardless of how tiny those wins” are, and never willing to betray wounds. “Like you, Grandmama beat the worst of white folk and the mean machinations of men every day she was alive,” he writes, “but y’all taught me indirectly that unacknowledged scars accumulated in battles won often hurt more than battles lost.”

For Laymon, trying to make sense of that lesson begins early. What is the toll—on themselves and others—as the women in his life labor to claim their human dignity? He watches his grandmother be demeaned by the rich white family she does laundry for (they don’t even call her by her real name). He’s witness to the fearful abuse visited on his mother by a man who parades as a black radical. Meanwhile, Laymon receives more than his share of welts at her hands, along with a fierce regimen of what she calls “redeeming value”: She assigns him books to read and reread and essays to write and rewrite, from which he learns many things, including more about white people than the many white teachers in his lousy schools will ever know about him. He also eats and eats, “to run away from memory,” finding safety but not absolution in food

and reaching close to 300 pounds. As Roxane Gay says of her own struggles with appetite in *Hunger*, Laymon alternates between reaching for a sense of power and reaching for a salve for powerlessness. He is admitted into the largely white world of Millsaps College as a basketball recruit, and publishes an editorial in the student newspaper about the racism of the place. It precipitates just the sort of battle with white people that his mother has reared him to avoid: a battle that he is bound to lose. Laymon is expelled.

GERALD DOESN’T START calibrating the price of black success in the land of the false American Memoir until he’s further along in life, a football recruit at Yale—a college he’d never heard of until coaches contacted his high school. The part of Dallas that Gerald grows up in is almost entirely black, from teachers to dope fiends. So as bad as his circumstances are—his mother is bipolar and disappears, and his father, a former football star, turns to drugs—he is spared the problem of two-ness that W. E. B. Du Bois powerfully evoked: Gerald has been told that white folks are racist, but how they see him doesn’t matter, so why bother looking through their eyes? He finds himself singled out at school, less by choice, he emphasizes in retrospect, than by chance. He accidentally impresses a teacher with a memorized speech; by fluke, he plays a recklessly heroic role in a high-school football game that gets him on the varsity squad and then in front of recruiters. He’s disappointed not to be picked by a college with a serious football team, but he’s launched into an elite he didn’t even know existed, swept along by how black folks see him. All urge him onward, because “if I went all the way, then *they* would go, too,” not that he has any idea where he is headed.

For both Gerald and Laymon, who transfers to Oberlin after Millsaps expels him, going all the way means losing themselves—in Laymon’s case, quite literally: He sheds pound after pound, running miles and miles and barely eating, obsessively weighing himself, as he rises through grad school and onto the Vassar faculty; his alternative to heaviness is a quest for a more bearable lightness of being. From the outside, this looks like what we call around the way “the come-up”—the journey of a person who’s made it. Gerald’s transformation from “one of the most bitter reclusive boys” at Yale (“the loneliest place in the world”) into a hard-driving leader looks like that too. Rather than burrow into a comfortable nook of blackness, he unites a vanguard of young black men into the Yale Black Men’s Union, determined to assert the authority that the Enlightenment, about which they are now learning, promises them they possess. But the group’s ethos—be perfect, and more—is punishing. Gerald, like Laymon, emphasizes the bodily



HEAVY:
AN AMERICAN
MEMOIR
KIESE LAYMON
Scribner



THERE WILL BE
NO MIRACLES HERE
CASEY GERALD
Riverhead

dimension of psychic pain in the pursuit of recognition: He stoically plays football before an injury heals (much as his father before him found heroism in enduring brutality on the field). He's well versed by now in the calculus of putting one's body on the line in order to be someone, no matter whether the battering is at one's own hands or another's.

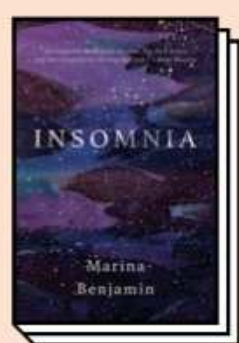
The bruising and disorienting experience of navigating America's unmarked black path to success eventually raises the question I was avoiding those cold nights at MIT: What does it mean to have arrived? Laymon and Gerald, their perspective sharpened by hindsight, insist on blunt answers. They recognize that they ended up in limbo, far from their old world and not really part of their new one, either suspected of being a fraud—as Laymon was by some colleagues when tenure time arrived at Vassar—or, in Gerald's case, spurred on in a way that left him feeling like a fraud, empty inside. A stellar young man on the superfast track (applying for a Rhodes Scholarship, joining programs to prepare underrepresented minorities for corporate careers, giving speeches), he was saluted and supported at every turn, and expected to spout the story that white people can't hear often enough about resilience born of hardship. He had become “a liar, if only by omission,” he reflects, hiding what he'd really seen on his journey, “how sad the whole thing is”—and how totally at odds with that vaunted American Memoir. “If you know the right people, they can help you do anything, be anybody, rules and hard work be damned—as long as they like you,” Gerald has learned in the hallowed halls, while “down in my forgotten world,” bootstraps and belts are supposed to count, and welts not to show.

Kiese Laymon is tired of black writers expending “so much creative energy begging white folk to change.”

Who needs and wants to hear about the truths he and Laymon have seen—“the real American Dream,” Gerald writes, “the way the country actually works”? Everybody and nobody, white and black: You won't be able to put these memoirs down, but not because they are breezy reading. They are, in Laymon's multilayered word, heavy—packed with reminders of how black dreams get skewed and deferred yet are also pregnant with the possibility that a kind of redemption may lie in intimate grappling with black realities.

Laymon is tired of black writers expending “so much creative energy begging white folk to change.” At the same time, he's tired of black folks avoiding the truths they need to talk about: He chafes at his mother's view that “white folk do not deserve to stick their nasty hands into our raw. Hiding from them and being excellent are actually the only ways for us to survive here.” Laymon's Grandmama, I would say, helped him embrace the forthright probing required not just to survive, but to have a chance at thriving. “It ain't about making white folk feel what you feel,” she told him—advice that Gerald's Granny seems to have lived by too. “It's about not feeling what they want you to feel. Do you hear me? You better know from whence you came and forget about those folk.” Unlike the American Memoir, our stories must be honest. That is how we get free. **A**

Christopher J. Lebron is an associate professor of philosophy at Johns Hopkins University and the author of The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea.



COVER TO COVER

Insomnia

MARINA BENJAMIN
CATAPULT

MARINA BENJAMIN, a memoirist and an editor at Aeon magazine, has produced an insomniac's ideal sleep aid—and that's a compliment. With her collage of ruminations about sleeplessness, she promises

no real cure. (Only a quack would.) What she offers instead is a rare kind of companionship to “other unseen insomniacs twisting awake in their own beds ... imprisoned within these solitary cells of

wakefulness.” In the bargain, she gives their slumbering bedmates (“Zzz,” she calls hers) a glimpse into “the strange things that can be seen and felt in insomnia.”

Benjamin has little patience for the pursuit of mindfulness. The “turbocharged” brain she knows well from writhing in the dark has primed her to seek insight in “mind wandering.” She ranges widely and suggestively, from Scheherazade's all-night tale-spinning

to the fascinating case of a patient awakened decades after an outbreak of sleeping sickness. She pauses many places in between, and returns often to long-suffering Penelope, waiting in Ithaca: As Odysseus's wife nightly unravels her day's weaving, she is the emblem of hope sustained amid uncertainty.

For sleepless readers familiar with the feeling of being trapped in anxious ruts, Benjamin's

celebration of mind wandering as “fleet and light and connective” may at times sound strained. But if her roaming induces fatigue now and then, her “border-crossing bravery” and curiosity prove highly contagious. Either way, her slim book is what the doctor ordered. (Plus, she shares a tip for the desperate: A plant called skullcap—a.k.a. mad-dog herb—delivers, she says, “the proverbial sleep of the dead.”)

— Ann Hulbert



BOOKS

Women Are Angry. Now What?

Rebecca Traister invokes fury to unify women in a battle against men, but being mad can prove divisive, too.

BY LAURA KIPNIS

ONE OF THE unfunny witticisms going around during Hillary Clinton's first presidential run was that she'd never get elected, because she reminded men of their first wife. When a male friend relayed the update during her second run—no, she didn't remind men of their first wife; she reminded them of their first wife's divorce lawyer—I recall barking with laughter. The joke distilled all the male anxieties of the moment: Something was being taken away from them, their balls were in a

vise, pissed-off women wanted men's stuff and were going to be ruthless about trying to get it.

I recalled this joke while reading Rebecca Traister's *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger*, which shares what might be called a divorce-court view of the gender situation in America. Men and women are on opposing sides, and women will succeed only by quashing men and seizing the spoils: the big jobs, the political offices, and the moral high ground. Walking us through recent events and still-fresh wounds—Black Lives Matter, the election of Donald Trump, the “Harvey-sized hole” blown in the news cycle (otherwise known as #MeToo)—Traister, who writes for *New York* magazine, is on a mission. Women's anger about all of this, she argues, can propel us from the “potentially revolutionary moment” we're in to one that actually alters the distribution of power. The main impediment to this taking place, in her view, is women's habit of hiding our rage.

“Women's anger spurs creativity and drives innovation in politics and social change, and it always has,” she writes. Stop crying when you're angry (tears can be tactical, but they also telegraph feminine weakness), and stop trying to make your bitchy self palatable—as Traister confesses to sometimes doing, about which she can be quite droll. (“So I was funny! And playful, cheeky, ironic, knowing!”) The small problem: “Many of us who may have covered our fury in humor have occasionally found ourselves exploding.”

The primary target for this accumulated rage is, of course, men—white men, and one in particular. The energy of the 2017 Women's March on Washington, the largest single-day rally in the nation's history, catalyzed *Good and Mad* into existence; by 2018, according to an *Elle* survey that Traister cites, 83 percent of Democratic women were furious at the news at least once a day. But the oppositional fury isn't exactly tidy, Traister acknowledges. For many of the women of color whom she quotes, the anger is equally directed at white women.

Fifty-two percent of them voted for Trump, and the real culprit behind his election, as Traister sees it, is white heterosexual marriage. Analyses of 2016 voting patterns reveal a stark partisan divide between married and never-married white women: The married ones predominantly voted Republican (57 percent); the never-married ones didn't (59 percent voted for Clinton). Even once-married women—widows and women who are separated—were more likely to vote Republican, though only 49 percent of divorced women did. From this Traister infers that proximity to white men incentivizes white women to shore up white male power wherever possible, and endorse “policies and parties that protect the economic and political status of the men on whom they depend.”



Traister's not wrong to focus on white men, who make up the traditional Republican base, after all. But determining just how to apportion the anger is murkier. Every week brings a fresh assessment of what happened in the 2016 election, confirming that white male Republicans didn't nose Trump to victory on their own. Let's not forget the Obama-Trump voter, the Sanders-Trump voter, and sizable chunks of the Latino and Asian vote, not to mention the drop in African American turnout and the Sanders voters who stayed home. Let's also not forget that patriarchy can't fully explain women's votes: We know little about the motives of the 32 percent of single women who backed Trump. And let's not forget Clinton's numerous errors.

ANGER HAS A way of making people righteous while clouding analysis—and undercutting actual clout. Traister herself thinks that our occasional admiration for female anger is in inverse proportion to its effects. We adore Ruth Bader Ginsburg, “a little doll of female anger,” precisely because the angry opinions she writes are constantly outvoted. Likewise, the Angry Black Woman—“the cultural caricature of neck-snapping, side-eye-casting black female censure”—gets celebrated and fetishized because she's so disconnected from real power. More often than not, she disrupts nothing. Such emblems do the work of expelling the anger that white women feel but can't express, Traister says. The upshot is the proliferation of GIFs known as “digital blackface,” which caricature extreme emotions and outsource them to black people.

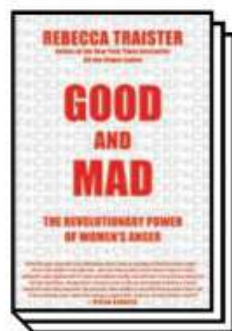
Traister's point is provocative. Yet I can't help feeling that her own urge to finally let loose leaves her resorting to analogous versions of outsourcing in her political analysis, deploying women of color as spigots of angry wisdom. She invokes Saira Rao, a lawyer recently defeated in a Democratic congressional primary in Colorado, who says,

I think the reason white women are the way they are is because the system is working for them and because they're comfortable in their Lululemon and comfortable putting aside their law degrees. So they want us to shut the fuck up because the system is working for them.

She cites Jessica Morales Rocketto, a left-wing activist, who points out that even if every person of color gets politically involved, “that's only 38 percent of America.” Addressing white women, Morales Rocketto goes on to issue this call: “And y'all control the banks, the businesses, you're the head of all the entertainment companies. So let's go, we need you.”

White women dominate banks and businesses and all have law degrees? This is where anger and accuracy part company. I wanted Traister to step in to say that identities are more complicated than this. For one thing, class distinctions exist (a subject she

According to an *Elle* survey, 83 percent of Democratic women are furious at the news at least once a day.



GOOD AND MAD:
THE REVOLUTIONARY
POWER OF WOMEN'S
ANGER
REBECCA TRAISTER
Simon & Schuster

barely mentions), and blurring whiteness with the 1 percent substitutes venting for thinking. Reducing the world to oppressors versus oppressed—whether that means men versus women, or white women versus minority women—may play well on social-justice Twitter, but in book form, isn't it an offline version of those useless angry GIFs?

Traister's main question is, in the words of one activist: “Are white women going to use their power to defend their own interests” or to address the injustices faced by other women? The answer is obvious. Some will ally themselves with larger struggles, and others won't. But even in commenting on those trying to do the former, Traister rides the white-cluelessness trope a little hard:

So it should be no wonder that when white women decided to participate in a protest against Donald Trump, after an election in which white women's willingness to protect white male power by electing an openly racist and misogynistic incompetent with authoritarian tendencies had been laid bare, black women would be anxious to explain that the white women newly awakened to rage were just that: newly awakened, and might have something to learn.

If I understand this mini-rant correctly, the white women involved in the Women's March are sister-wives of the ones who voted for Trump. As if the nightmare of Trump weren't bad enough, now we have the inverse of Trumpian blame games and purity politics, in the form of feminists lambasting one another over who's more tainted by supposed proximity to male power. Perhaps this is Trump's brilliance: He so saturates our brains that even feminists can't help modeling their discourse on his—and in a book meant to unite women into a political force to be reckoned with.

THE BLAME GAME is also politically shortsighted. Letting a selection of angry voices be heard, as Traister does, makes for lively reading and in theory should galvanize a broader mission, yet the exclusion of other necessary voices leaves her with a disappointingly tepid feminist agenda. When she chastises second-wave feminists of the NOW generation for being insufficiently concerned with diversity, she's overlooking the fact that the political demands of that generation were actually far more encompassing and radical than anything on the table today—among them free child care and free abortions. Feminists rallied behind these causes in the 1970 Women's Strike for Equality, at that point the largest political gathering of women in American history.

What remains radical in those demands is the implicit recognition that women are situated differently in the economy—and in the world—than men



are. The reason for this lies in the socially imposed costs that accompany the female body. We hear a lot lately about glass ceilings and the economic repercussions of sexual harassment, but other issues unite women even more profoundly, not least motherhood. Eighty-six percent of women in the U.S. have children, a far larger cohort than the roster hit on by Leon Wieseltier (whose behavior gets more agonized treatment in *Good and Mad* than the material burdens of maternity do).

The majority of mothers also have jobs, which means that vast numbers of women of all races and classes are grappling with the same old problem: child care. (Obviously nature doesn't dictate that childbearers are also responsible for child-raising—these are social decisions—but for reasons we could discuss until the end of eternity, that arrangement still mostly prevails.) And let's not prettify things. Maternity can be impoverishing—the result of yet more social decisions. Female-headed households are overrepresented in families living below the poverty line, and black mothers are far more likely to be in this group than white mothers are. (By contrast, in France, to take one much-cited example, publicly funded nurseries and preschool are regarded as a social right; 95 percent of children attend the latter, and the percentage of GDP spending on children is more than twice what it is in the United States.)

In passing, Traister wonders, as do I, about the expansion of #MeToo grievances into complaints about “plain old bad sex” and minor affronts. The political question we're left with is whether the movement has been sufficiently ambitious. NOW's demands, nearly 50 years ago, were radical because they involved redistributing resources and altering economic priorities in ways that would benefit women (both working and nonworking) across race and class lines. In the intervening years we've seen the priorities of American feminism shift from resources to injuries, and feminist demands reduced to little more than Band-Aids for the many and corner offices for the lucky few.

Frankly, I'm a lot angrier about the resource redistribution that has happened in recent decades—directed almost entirely upward rather than outward, into social spending—than about Trump's pussy-grabbing, not that it's an either-or. What's required, for the current anger to amount to anything lasting, is a rigorous feminist analysis that connects the treatment of women's bodies in the workplace with the treatment of women's bodies in the civic sphere. When you think about it, women's bodies are regarded as almost a public utility, their availability for free groping and for the repopulating of the labor force all but taken for granted. At the same time, women are subject to a hidden system of taxation, whether that means sleeping with the gross boss, paying for the abortion when a slipup happens, shelling out an exorbitant percentage of

your already unequal salary for day care, or facing a stalled career if you don't. We're in the habit of treating these as separate issues (and, falsely, as “personal” ones), maybe because once they're placed in the same frame, women might really get furious.

So yes, I'm angry. What follows? Traister's proposed strategy is electing more women to political office, and the last section of *Good and Mad* focuses on efforts to recruit and train female candidates. My question is what these women candidates stand for, because Traister doesn't say. I'm asking because I don't believe political smarts or values automatically flow from identity. That's not an anti-identity-politics position, by the way. No one but a political idiot can fail to notice that the social progress of the past half century—on civil rights, feminism, gay marriage, disability issues—has been grounded in appeals to identity. But if my choice is between a neoliberal woman and a socialist man, why would I automatically vote for the woman? We don't share an identity, because I disidentify with her politics.

Traister has wrestled still-unfolding history into an admirably rousing narrative, but the time might be ripe for a more explosive vision. Why set the bar so low—unless we've forgotten how to do anything else? **A**

Laura Kipnis is the author, most recently, of Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus.



J. Allyn Rosser's most recent collection is *Mimi's Trapeze* (2014).

TO APOLLO

Whose songs, whose lyre, whose careless sighs
are these?

You taught us to divide the air in melodies
when all we knew to do with it was breathe.

You've never worked a day of your gorgeous career,
striking a cheesecake pose on that lifeguard chair,
soaking up sun (and every mortal being's stare)

to tan, but never burn. Who needs sunblock

when you can haul the sun behind the clouds

when not horsing around around the clock,

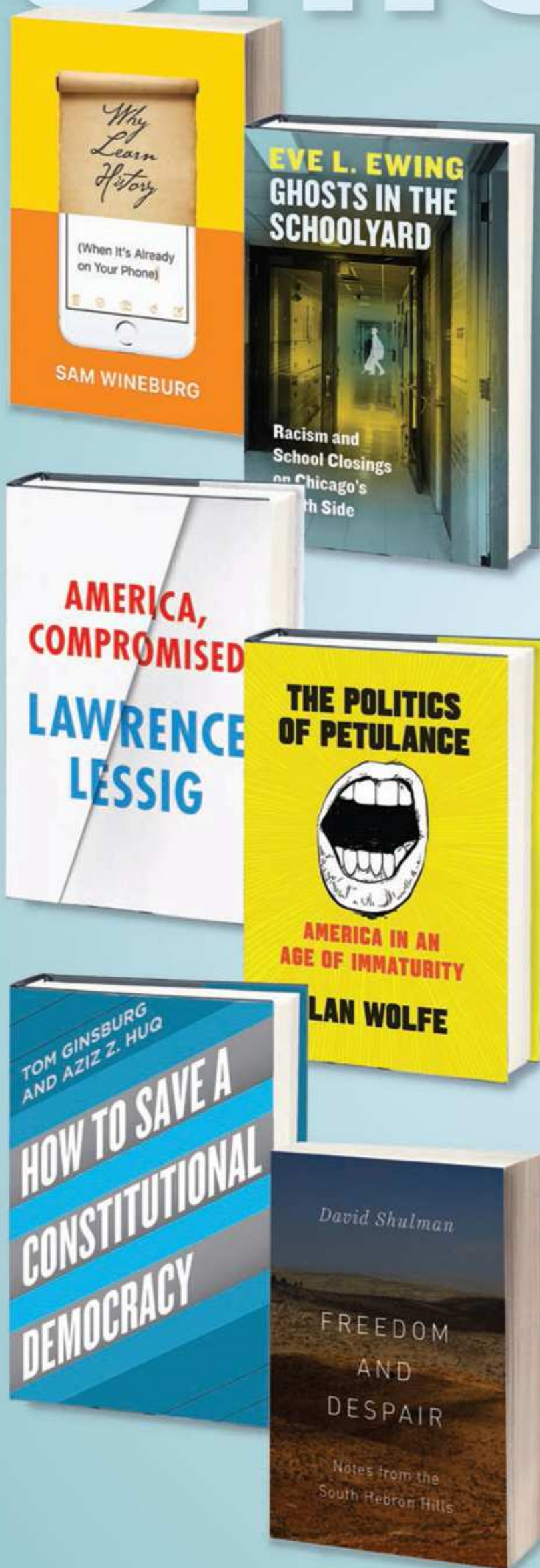
when not giving chase to the one girl who doubts

you're a catch, leaving her in a stand of trees,

whose sighs, whose hair, still toss upon the breeze?

— J. Allyn Rosser

CHICAGO



Why Learn History (When It's Already on Your Phone)

Sam Wineburg

"Wineburg offers a set of timely and elegant essays on everything from the nuttiness of standardized testing regimes to the problems kids have, in the age of the internet, in knowing what's true, and what's not—problems that teachers have, too, along with everyone else. A bracing, edifying, and vital book."—Jill Lepore

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"Mixing history, sociology, and even memoir, *Ghosts in the Schoolyard* is an important addition to any conversation about the future of public schools and those they were designed to serve."—Ta-Nehisi Coates

"A chilling must-read investigation of racism in Chicago's education system."—*Foreword Reviews*

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Alan Wolfe

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Tom Ginsburg and Aziz Z. Huq

"Awe inspiring. *How to Save a Constitutional Democracy* is masterfully informed, crystal clear, and exceptionally sober. I learned an enormous amount."—Adam Przeworski, New York University

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Freedom and Despair

Notes from the South Hebron Hills

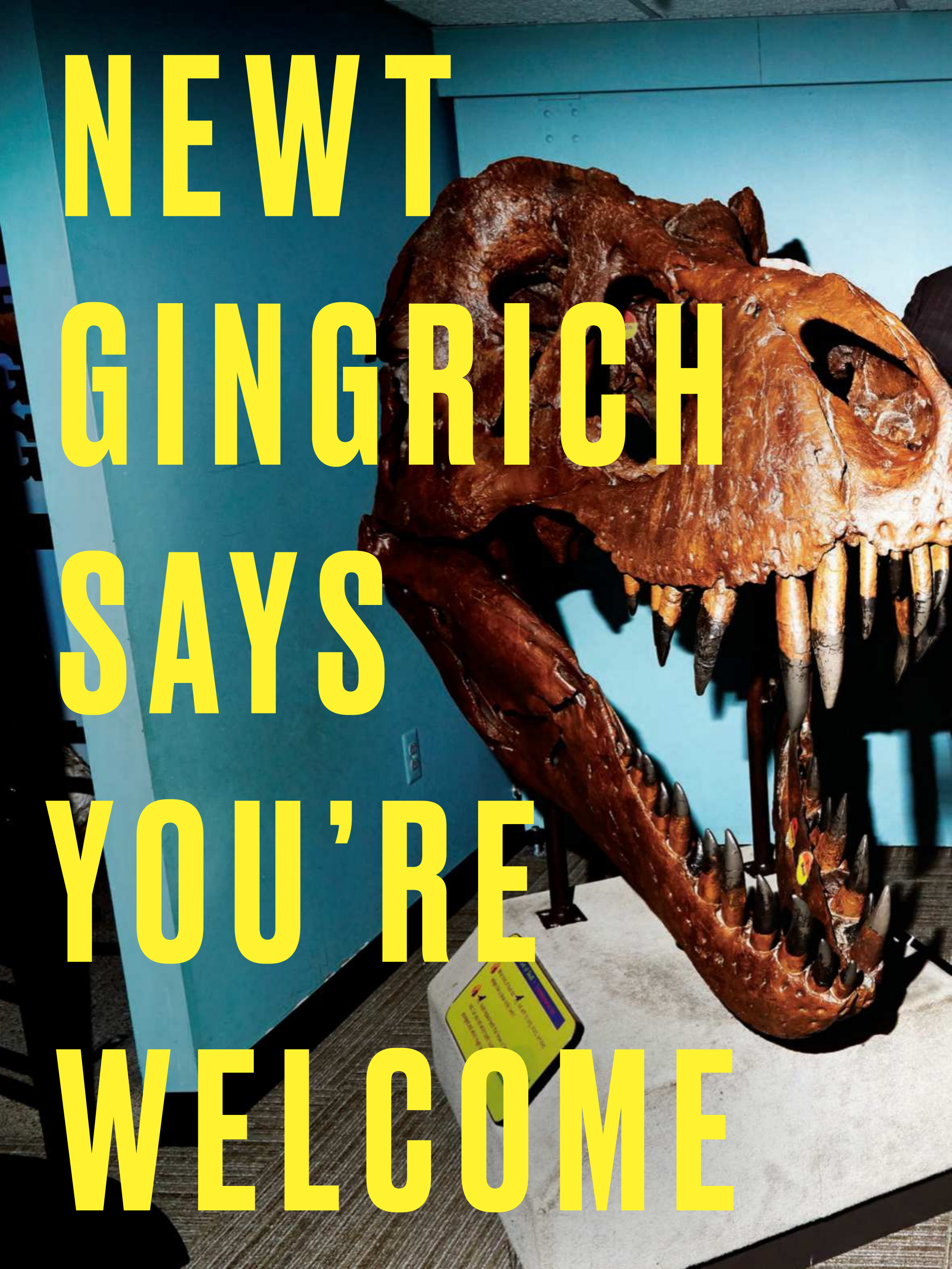
David Shulman

"Shulman sees injustice perpetuated by his neighbors, he sees his government defend the indefensible, and he knows that he must act, speak, and fight for better. . . . A persuasive, moving, and crucially needed account of resistance in these contentious times."—*Foreword*

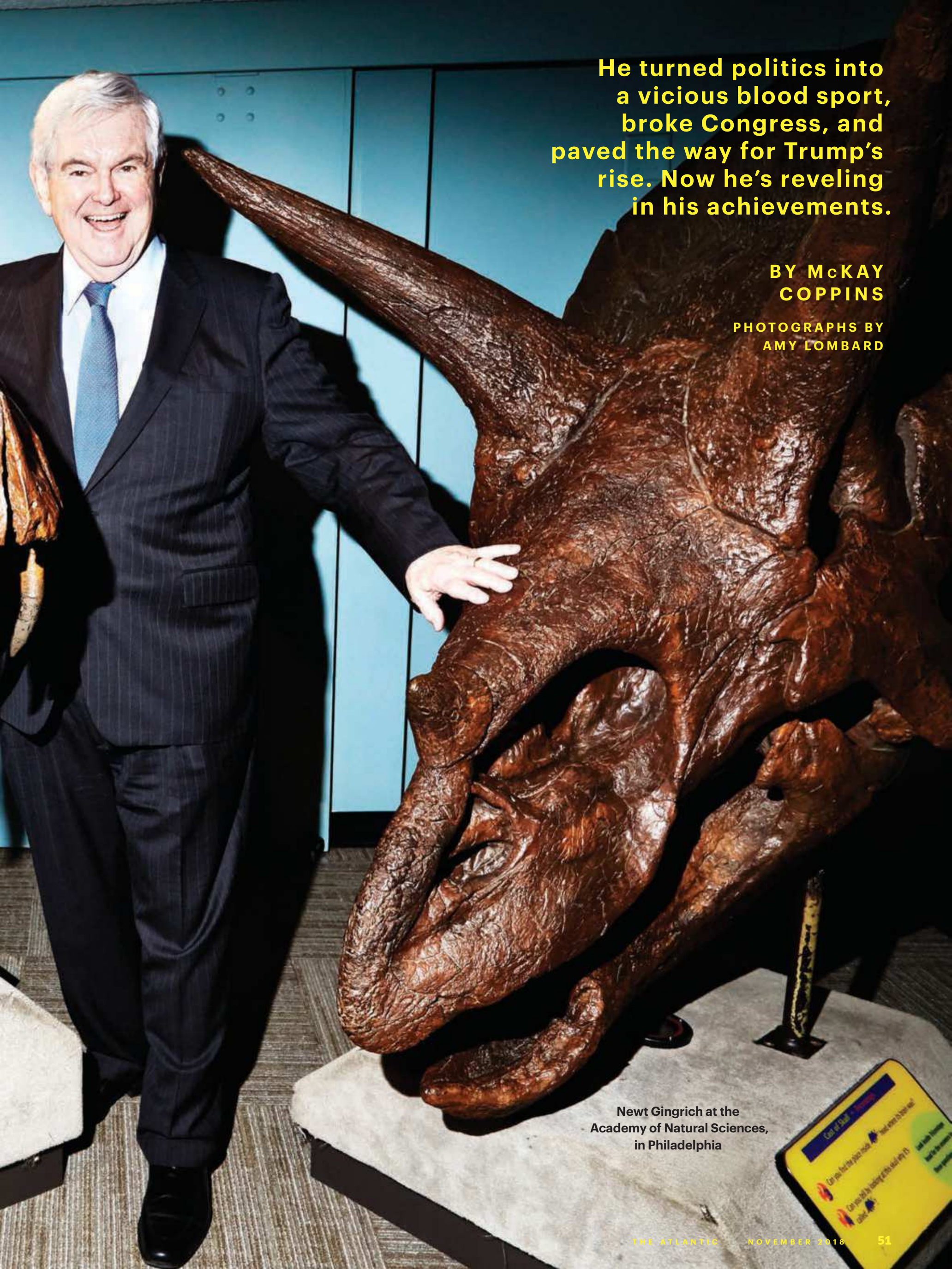
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NEWT
GINGRICH
SAYS
YOU'RE
WELCOME



**He turned politics into
a vicious blood sport,
broke Congress, and
paved the way for Trump's
rise. Now he's reveling
in his achievements.**

**BY MCKAY
COPPINS**

**PHOTOGRAPHS BY
AMY LOMBARD**

Newt Gingrich at the
Academy of Natural Sciences,
in Philadelphia

Newt Gingrich is an important man, a man of refined tastes, accustomed to a certain lifestyle, and so when he visits the zoo, he does not merely stand with all the other patrons to look at the tortoises—he goes inside the tank. ¶ On this particular afternoon in late March, the former speaker of the House can be found shuffling giddily around a damp, 90-degree enclosure at the Philadelphia Zoo—a rumpled suit draped over his elephantine frame, plastic booties wrapped around his feet—as he tickles and strokes and paws at the giant shelled reptiles, declaring them “very cool.” ¶ It’s a weird scene, and after a few minutes, onlookers begin to gather on the other side of the glass—craning their necks and snapping pictures with their phones and asking each other, *Is that who I think it is?* The attention would be enough to make a lesser man—say, a sweaty magazine writer who followed his subject into the tortoise tank for reasons that are now escaping him—grow self-conscious. But Gingrich, for whom all of this rather closely approximates a natural habitat, barely seems to notice. ¶ A well-known animal fanatic, Gingrich was the one who suggested we meet at the Philadelphia Zoo. He used to come here as a kid, and has fond memories of family picnics on warm afternoons, gazing up at the giraffes and rhinos and dreaming of one day becoming a zookeeper. But we aren’t here just for the nostalgia. ¶ “There is,” he explained soon after arriving, “a lot we can learn from the natural world.” ¶ Since then, Gingrich has spent much of the day using zoo animals to teach me about politics and human affairs. In the reptile room, I learn that the evolutionary stability of the crocodile (“Ninety million years,

and they haven’t changed much”) illustrates the folly of pursuing change for its own sake: “If you’re doing something right, keep doing it.”

Outside the lion pen, Gingrich treats me to a brief discourse on gender theory: “The male lion procreates, protects the pride, and sleeps. The females hunt, and as soon as they find something, the male knocks them over and takes the best portion. It’s the opposite of every American feminist vision of the world—but it’s a fact!”

But the most important lesson comes as we wander through Monkey Junction. Gingrich tells me about one of his favorite books, *Chimpanzee Politics*, in which the primatologist Frans de Waal documents the complex rivalries and coalitions that govern communities of chimps. De Waal’s thesis is that human politics, in all its brutality and ugliness, is “part of an evolutionary heritage we share with our close relatives”—and Gingrich clearly agrees.

For several minutes, he lectures me about the perils of failing to understand the animal kingdom. Disney, he says, has done us a disservice with whitewashed movies like *The Lion King*, in which friendly jungle cats get along with their zebra neighbors instead of attacking them and devouring their carcasses. And for all the famous feel-good photos of Jane Goodall interacting with chimps in the wild, he tells me, her later work showed that she was “horrified” to find her beloved creatures killing one another for sport, and feasting on baby chimps.

It is crucial, Gingrich says, that we humans see the animal kingdom from which we evolved for what it really is: “A very competitive, challenging world, at every level.”

As he pauses to catch his breath, I peer out over the sprawling primate reserve. Spider monkeys swing wildly from bar to bar on an elaborate jungle gym, while black-and-white lemurs leap and tumble over one another, and a hulking gorilla grunts in the distance.

At a loss for what to say, I start to mutter something about the viciousness of the animal world—but Gingrich cuts me off. “It’s not viciousness,” he corrects me, his voice suddenly stern. “It’s *natural*.”

THERE’S SOMETHING ABOUT Newt Gingrich that seems to capture the spirit of America circa 2018. With his immense head and white mop of hair; his cold, boyish grin; and his high, raspy voice, he has the air of a late-empire Roman senator—a walking bundle of appetites and excesses and hubris and wit. In conversation, he toggles unnervingly between grandiose pronouncements about “Western civilization” and partisan cheap shots that seem tailored for cable news. It’s a combination of self-righteousness and smallness, of pomposity and pettiness, that personifies the decadence of this era.

In the clamorous story of Donald Trump’s Washington, it would be easy to mistake Gingrich for a minor character. A loyal Trump ally in 2016, Gingrich forwent a high-powered post in the administration and has instead spent the years since the election cashing in on his access—churning out books (three Trump hagiographies, one spy thriller), working the speaking circuit (where he commands as much as \$75,000 per talk for his insights on the president), and popping up on Fox News as a paid contributor. He spends much of his time in Rome, where his wife, Callista, serves as Trump’s ambassador to the Vatican and where, he likes to boast, “We have yet to find a bad restaurant.”

But few figures in modern history have done more than Gingrich to lay the groundwork for Trump’s rise. During his two decades in Congress, he pioneered a style of partisan combat—replete with name-calling, conspiracy theories, and strategic

obstructionism—that poisoned America’s political culture and plunged Washington into permanent dysfunction. Gingrich’s career can perhaps be best understood as a grand exercise in devolution—an effort to strip American politics of the civilizing traits it had developed over time and return it to its most primal essence.

When I ask him how he views his legacy, Gingrich takes me on a tour of a Western world gripped by crisis. In Washington, chaos reigns as institutional authority crumbles. Throughout America, right-wing Trumpites and left-wing resisters are treating mid-term races like calamitous fronts in a civil war that must be won at all costs. And in Europe, populist revolts are wreaking havoc in capitals across the Continent.

Twenty-five years after engineering the Republican Revolution, Gingrich can draw a direct line from his work in Congress to the upheaval now taking place around the globe. But as he surveys the wreckage of the modern political landscape, he is not regretful. He’s gleeful.

“The old order is dying,” he tells me. “Almost everywhere you have freedom, you have a very deep discontent that the system isn’t working.”

And that’s a good thing? I ask.

“It’s essential,” he says, “if you want Western civilization to survive.”

ON JUNE 24, 1978, Gingrich stood to address a gathering of College Republicans at a Holiday Inn near the Atlanta airport. It was a natural audience for him. At 35, he was more youthful-looking than the average congressional candidate, with fashionably robust sideburns and a cool-professor charisma that had made him one of the more popular faculty members at West Georgia College.

But Gingrich had not come to deliver an academic lecture to the young activists before him—he had come to foment revolution.

“One of the great problems we have in the Republican Party is that we don’t encourage you to be nasty,” he told the group. “We encourage you to be neat, obedient, and loyal, and faithful, and all those Boy Scout words, which would be great around the campfire but are lousy in politics.”

For their party to succeed, Gingrich went on, the next generation of Republicans would have to learn to “raise hell,” to stop being so “nice,” to realize that politics was, above all, a cutthroat “war for power”—and to start acting like it.

The speech received little attention at the time. Gingrich was, after all, an obscure, untenured professor whose political experience consisted of two failed congressional bids. But when, a

few months later, he was finally elected to the House of Representatives on his third try, he went to Washington a man obsessed with becoming the kind of leader he had described that day in Atlanta.

The GOP was then at its lowest point in modern history. Scores of Republican lawmakers had been wiped out in the aftermath of Watergate, and those who’d survived seemed, to Gingrich, sadly resigned to a “permanent minority” mind-set. “It was like death,” he recalls of the mood in the caucus. “They were morally and psychologically shattered.”

But Gingrich had a plan. The way he saw it, Republicans would never be able to take back the House as long as they kept compromising with the Democrats out of some high-minded civic desire to keep congressional business humming along. His strategy was to blow up the bipartisan coalitions that were essential to legislating, and then seize on the resulting dysfunction to wage a populist crusade against the institution of Congress itself. “His idea,” says Norm Ornstein, a political scientist who knew Gingrich at the time, “was to build toward a national election where people were so disgusted by Washington and the way it was operating that they would throw the ins out and bring the outs in.”

Gingrich recruited a cadre of young bomb throwers—a group of 12 congressmen he christened the Conservative Opportunity Society—and together they stalked the halls of Capitol Hill, searching for trouble and TV cameras. Their emergence was not, at first, greeted with enthusiasm by the more moderate Republican leadership. They were too noisy, too brash, too hostile to the old guard’s

Gingrich at the Philadelphia Zoo in March, drawing lessons about politics from the natural world



cherished sense of decorum. They even *looked* different—sporting blow-dried pompadours while their more camera-shy elders smeared Brylcreem on their comb-overs.

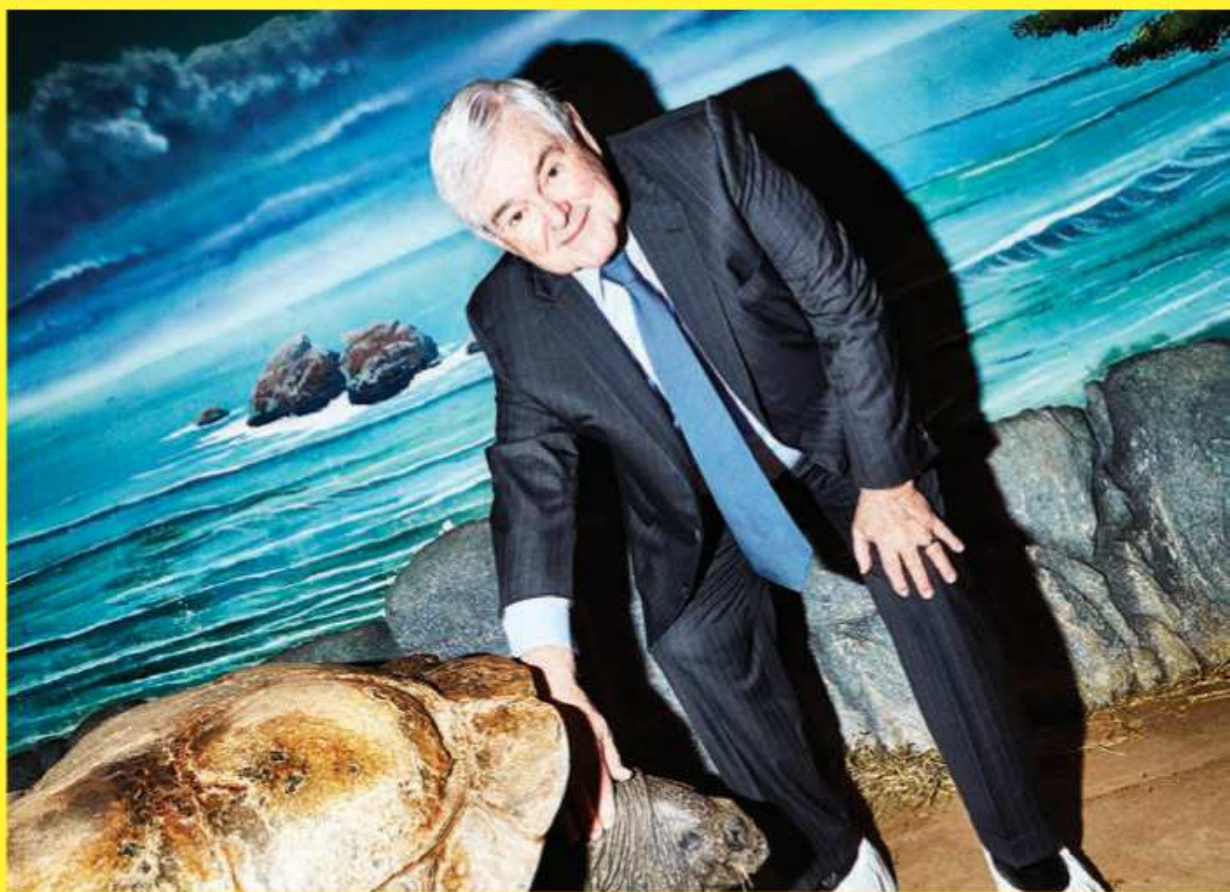
Gingrich and his cohort showed little interest in legislating, a task that had heretofore been seen as the primary responsibility of elected legislators. Bob Livingston, a Louisiana Republican who had been elected to Congress a year before Gingrich, marveled at the way the hard-charging Georgian rose to prominence by ignoring the traditional path taken by new lawmakers. “My idea was to work within the committee structure, take care of my district, and just pay attention to the legislative process,” Livingston told me. “But Newt came in as a revolutionary.”

For revolutionary purposes, the House of Representatives was less a governing body than an arena for conflict and drama. And Gingrich found ways to put on a show. He recognized an opportunity in the newly installed C-SPAN cameras, and began delivering tirades against Democrats to an empty chamber, knowing that his remarks would be beamed to viewers across the country.

As his profile grew, Gingrich took aim at the moderates in his own party—calling Bob Dole the “tax collector for the welfare state”—and baited Democratic leaders with all manner of epithet and insult: *pro-communist*, *un-American*, *tyrannical*. In 1984, one of his floor speeches prompted a red-faced eruption from Speaker Tip O’Neill, who said of Gingrich’s attacks, “It’s the lowest thing that I’ve ever seen in my 32 years in Congress!” The episode landed them both on the nightly news, and Gingrich, knowing the score, declared victory. “I am now a famous person,” he gloated to *The Washington Post*.

It’s hard to overstate just how radical these actions were at the time. Although Congress had been a volatile place during periods of American history—with fistfights and canings and representatives bellowing violent threats at one another—by the middle of the 20th century, lawmakers had largely coalesced around a stabilizing set of norms and traditions. Entrenched committee chairs may have dabbled in petty corruption, and Democratic leaders may have pushed around the Republican minority when they were in a pinch, but as a rule, comity reigned. “Most members still believed in the idea that the Framers had in mind,” says Thomas Mann, a scholar who studies Congress. “They believed in genuine deliberation and compromise ... and they had institutional loyalty.”

This ethos was perhaps best embodied by Republican Minority Leader Bob Michel, an amiable World War II veteran known around Washington for his aversion to swearing—*doggone it* and *by Jiminy* were fixtures of his vocabulary—as well as his penchant for carpooling and golfing with Democratic colleagues. Michel was no liberal, but he believed that the best way to serve conservatism, and his country, was by working honestly with Democratic leaders—pulling legislation inch by inch to the right when he could, and protecting the good faith that made aisle-crossing possible.



Gingrich, who once dreamed of becoming a zookeeper, gets into a tank with the zoo’s tortoises.

Gingrich was unimpressed by Michel’s conciliatory approach. “He represented a culture which had been defeated consistently,” he recalls. More important, Gingrich intuited that the old dynamics that had produced public servants like Michel were crumbling. Tectonic shifts in American politics—particularly around issues of race and civil rights—had triggered an ideological sorting between the two parties. Liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats (two groups that had been well represented in Congress) were beginning to vanish, and with them, the cross-party partnerships that had fostered cooperation.

This polarization didn’t originate with Gingrich, but he took advantage of it, as he set out to circumvent the old power structures and build his own. Rather than letting the party bosses in Washington decide which candidates deserved institutional support, he took control of a group called GOPAC and used it to recruit and train an army of mini-Newts to run for office.

Gingrich hustled to keep his cause—and himself—in the press. “If you’re not in *The Washington Post* every day, you might as well not exist,” he told one reporter. His secret to capturing headlines was simple, he explained to supporters: “The No. 1 fact about the news media is they love fights ... When you give them confrontations, you get attention; when you get attention, you can educate.”

Effective as these tactics were in the short term, they had a corrosive effect on the way Congress operated. “Gradually, it went from legislating, to the weaponization of legislating, to the permanent campaign, to the permanent war,” Mann says. “It’s like he took a wrecking ball to the most powerful and influential legislature in the world.”

But Gingrich looks back with pride on the transformations he set in motion. “Noise became a proxy for status,” he tells me. And no one was noisier than Newt.

WE ARE IN THE PETTING ZOO, examining the goats, when Gingrich decides to tell me about the moment he first glimpsed his destiny as one of history's great men.

It was 1958, and he was 15 years old. His family was visiting Verdun, a small city in northeastern France where 300,000 people had been killed during World War I. The battlefield was still scarred by cannon fire, and young Newt spent the day wandering around, taking in the details. He found a rusted helmet on the ground, saw the ossuary where the bones of dead soldiers were piled high. "I realized countries can die," he says—and he decided it would be up to him to make sure that America didn't.

This is an important scene in the Newt Gingrich creation myth, and he has turned to it repeatedly over the years to satisfy journalists and biographers searching for a "Rosebud" moment. But the rest of Gingrich's childhood may be just as instructive. His mother struggled with manic depression, and spent much of her adult life in a fog of medication. His stepfather was a brooding, violent man who showed little affection for "Newtie," the pudgy, flat-footed, bookish boy his wife had foisted upon him. Gingrich moved around a lot and had few friends his age; he spent more time alone in his room reading books about dinosaurs than he did playing with the neighborhood kids.

But this is not the stuff Gingrich likes to talk about. When asked, he describes his childhood as ordinary, even "idyllic," allowing only glimpses of the full picture when you press him for details. Those family picnics at the zoo that he has been reminiscing about all day? They weren't with his parents, it turns out, but his aunts, who were looking for ways to make their lonely nephew happy.

It was in Verdun that Gingrich found an identity, a sense of purpose. "I decided then that I basically had three jobs," he tells me. "Figure out what we had to do to survive"—the *we* here being proponents of Western civilization, the threats being vague and unspecified—"figure out how to explain it so that the American people would give us permission, and figure out how to implement it once they gave us permission. That's what I've done since August of '58."

The next year, Gingrich turned in a 180-page term paper about the balance of global power, and announced to his teacher that his family was moving to Georgia, where he planned to start a Republican Party in the then-heavily Democratic state and get himself elected to Congress.

Gingrich immersed himself in war histories and dystopian fiction and books about techno-futurism—and as the years went on, he became fixated on the idea that he was a world-historic hero. He has described himself as a "transformational figure" and "the most serious, systematic revolutionary of modern times." To one reporter, he declared, "I want to shift the entire planet. And I'm doing it." To another, he said, "People like me are what stand between us and Auschwitz."

As Gingrich tells me about his epiphany in Verdun, a man in a baseball cap approaches us in full fanboy mode. "*Newt Gingrich!*" he exclaims. "Good to see you, man. I love you on Fox."

"Thank you," Gingrich replies. "Please keep watching."

This has been happening all day—fans coming up to request selfies, or to shake his hand, or to thank him for his work in "draining the swamp." It's a reminder that to a certain swath of America, Gingrich is not some washed-up partisan hack; he's a towering statesman, a visionary hero, the man he set out to be.

After the superfan leaves, I make a passing observation about how many admirers Gingrich has at the zoo.

"I think you'd be surprised," he tells me, his voice dripping with condescension. "You get outside of Washington and New York and there are an amazing number of people like this who show up."

BY 1988, GINGRICH'S PLAN to conquer Congress via sabotage was well under way. As his national profile had risen, so too had his influence within the Republican caucus—his original quorum of 12 disciples having expanded to dozens of sharp-elbowed House conservatives who looked to him for guidance.

Gingrich encouraged them to go after their enemies with catchy, alliterative nicknames—"Daffy Dukakis," "the loony left"—and schooled them in the art of partisan blood sport. Through GOPAC, he sent out cassette tapes and memos to Republican candidates across the country who wanted to "speak like Newt," providing them with carefully honed attack lines and creating, quite literally, a new vocabulary for a generation of conservatives. One memo, titled "Language: A Key Mechanism of Control," included a list of recommended words to use in describing Democrats: *sick, pathetic, lie, anti-flag, traitors, radical, corrupt*.

The goal was to reframe the boring policy debates in Washington as a national battle between good and evil, white hats versus black—a fight for the very soul of America. Through this prism, any news story could be turned into a wedge. Woody Allen had an affair with his partner's adoptive daughter? "It fits the Democratic Party platform perfectly," Gingrich declared. A deranged South Carolina woman murdered her two children? A symptom

"People like me are what stand between us and Auschwitz," Gingrich once told a reporter.

of a "sick" society, Gingrich intoned—and "the only way you can get change is to vote Republican."

Gingrich was not above mining the darkest reaches of the right-wing fever swamps for material. When Vince Foster, a staffer in the Clinton White House, committed suicide, Gingrich publicly flirted with fringe conspiracy theories that suggested he had been assassinated. "He took these things that were confined to the margins of the conservative movement and mainstreamed them," says David Brock, who worked as a conservative journalist at the time, covering the various Clinton scandals, before later becoming a Democratic operative. "What I think he saw was the potential for using them to throw sand in the gears of Clinton's ability to govern."

Despite his growing grassroots following, Gingrich remained unpopular among a certain contingent of congressional Republicans, who were scandalized by his tactics. But that started to change when Democrats elected Texas Congressman Jim Wright as speaker. Whereas Tip O'Neill had been known for working across party lines, Wright came off as gruff

and power-hungry—and his efforts to sideline the Republican minority enraged even many of the GOP’s mild-mannered moderates. “People started asking, ‘Who’s the meanest, nastiest son of a bitch we can get to fight back?’” recalls Mickey Edwards, a Republican who was then representing Oklahoma in the House. “And, of course, that was Newt Gingrich.”

Gingrich unleashed a smear campaign aimed at taking Wright down. He reportedly circulated unsupported rumors about a scandal involving a teenage congressional page, and tried to tie Wright to shady foreign-lobbying practices. Finally, one allegation gained traction—that Wright had used \$60,000 in book royalties to evade limits on outside income. Watergate, this was not. But it was enough to force Wright’s resignation, and hand Gingrich the scalp he so craved.

The episode cemented Gingrich’s status as the de facto leader of the GOP in Washington. Heading into the 1994 midterms, he rallied Republicans around the idea of turning Election Day into a national referendum. On September 27, more than 300 candidates gathered outside the Capitol to sign the “Contract With America,” a document of Gingrich’s creation that outlined 10 bills Republicans promised to pass if they took control of the House.

“Today, on these steps, we offer this contract as a first step towards renewing American civilization,” Gingrich proclaimed.

While candidates fanned out across the country to campaign on the contract, Gingrich and his fellow Republican leaders in Congress held fast to their strategy of gridlock. As Election Day approached, they maneuvered to block every piece of legislation they could—even those that might ordinarily have received bipartisan support, like a lobbying-reform bill—on the theory that voters would blame Democrats for the paralysis.

“People started asking, ‘Who’s the meanest, nastiest son of a bitch we can get to fight back?’ And, of course, that was Newt Gingrich.”

Pundits, aghast at the brazenness of the strategy, predicted backlash from voters—but few seemed to notice. Even some Republicans were surprised by what they were getting away with. Bill Kristol, then a GOP strategist, marveled at the success of his party’s “principled obstructionism.” An up-and-coming senator named Mitch McConnell was quoted crowing that opposing the Democrats’ agenda “gives gridlock a good name.” When the 103rd Congress adjourned in October, *The Washington Post* declared it “perhaps the worst Congress” in 50 years.

Yet Gingrich’s plan worked. By the time voters went to the polls, exit surveys revealed widespread frustration with Congress and a deep appetite for change. Republicans achieved one of the most sweeping electoral victories in modern American history. They picked up 54 seats in the House and seized state legislatures and governorships across the country; for the first time in 40 years, the GOP took control of both houses of Congress.

On election night, Republicans packed into a ballroom in the Atlanta suburbs, waving placards that read LIBERALS, YOUR TIME IS UP! and sporting RUSH LIMBAUGH FOR PRESIDENT T-shirts. The band played “Happy Days Are Here Again” and Gingrich—the next speaker of the House, the new philosopher-king of the Republican Party—took the stage to raucous cheers.

With victory in hand, Gingrich did his best to play the statesman, saying he would “reach out to every Democrat who wants to work with us” and promising to be “speaker of the House, not speaker of the Republican Party.”

But the true spirit of the Republican Revolution was best captured by the event’s emcee, a local talk-radio host in Atlanta who had hitched his star to the Newt wagon early on. Grinning out at the audience, he announced that a package had just arrived at the White House with some Tylenol in it.

President Clinton, joked Sean Hannity, was about to “feel the pain.”

THE FRESHMAN REPUBLICANS who entered Congress in January 1995 were lawmakers created in the image of Newt: young, confrontational, and determined to inflict radical change on Washington.

Gingrich encouraged this revolutionary zeal, quoting Thomas Paine—“We have it in our power to begin the world over again”—and working to instill a conviction among his followers that they were political gate-crashers, come to leave their dent on American history. What Gingrich didn’t tell them—or perhaps refused to believe himself—was that in Congress, history is seldom made without consensus-

building and horse-trading. From the creation of interstate highways to the passage of civil-rights legislation, the most significant, lasting acts of Congress have been achieved by lawmakers who deftly maneuver through the legislative process and work with members of both parties.

On January 4, Speaker Gingrich gavled Congress into session, and promptly got to work transforming America. Over the next 100 days, he and his fellow Republicans worked feverishly to pass bills with names that sounded like they’d come from Republican Mad Libs—the American Dream Restoration Act, the Taking Back Our Streets Act, the Fiscal Responsibility Act. But when the dust settled, America didn’t look all that different. Almost all of the House’s big-ticket bills got snuffed out in the Senate, or died by way of presidential veto.

Instead, the most enduring aspects of Gingrich’s speakership would be his tactical innovations. Determined to keep Republicans in power, Gingrich re-oriented the congressional schedule around filling campaign war chests, shortening the official work week to three days so that members had time to dial for dollars. From 1994 to 1998, Republicans raised an unprecedented \$1 billion, and ushered in a new era of money in politics.

Gingrich’s famous budget battles with Bill Clinton in 1995 gave way to another great partisan invention: the weaponized government shutdown. There had



been federal funding lapses before, but they tended to be minor affairs that lasted only a day or two. Gingrich's shutdown, by contrast, furloughed hundreds of thousands of government workers for several weeks at Christmastime, so Republicans could use their paychecks as a bartering chip in negotiations with the White House. The gambit was a bust—voters blamed the GOP for the crisis, and Gingrich was castigated in the press—but it ensured that the shutdown threat would loom over every congressional standoff from that point on.

There were real accomplishments during Gingrich's speakership, too—a tax cut, a bipartisan health-care deal, even a balanced federal budget—and for a time, truly historic triumphs seemed within reach. Over the course of several secret meetings at the White House in the fall of 1997, Gingrich told me, he and Clinton sketched out plans for a center-right coalition that would undertake big, challenging projects such as a wholesale reform of Social Security.

But by then, the poisonous politics Gingrich had injected into Washington's bloodstream had escaped his control. So when the stories started coming out in early 1998—the ones about the president and the intern, the cigar and the blue dress—and the party faithful were clamoring for Clinton's head on a pike, and Gingrich's acolytes in the House were stomping their feet and crying for blood ... well, he knew what he had to do.

This is “the most systematic, deliberate obstruction-of-justice cover-up and effort to avoid the truth we have ever seen in American history!” Gingrich declared of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, pledging that he would keep banging the drum until Clinton was impeached. “I will never again, as long as I am speaker, make a speech without commenting on this topic.”

Never mind that Republicans had no real chance of getting the impeachment through the Senate. Removing the president wasn't the point; this was an opportunity to humiliate the Democrats. Politics was a “war for power,” just as Gingrich had prophesied all those years ago—and he wasn't about to give up the fight.

The rest is immortalized in the history books that line Gingrich's library. The GOP's impeachment crusade backfired with voters, Republicans lost seats in the House—and Gingrich was driven out of his job by the same bloodthirsty brigade he'd helped elect. “I'm willing to lead,” he sniffed on his way out the door, “but I'm not willing to preside over people who are cannibals.”

THE GREAT IRONY of Gingrich's rise and reign is that, in the end, he did fundamentally transform America—just not in the ways he'd hoped. He thought he was enshrining a new era of conservative government. In fact, he was enshrining an attitude—angry, combative, tribal—that would infect politics for decades to come.

In the years since he left the House, Gingrich has only doubled down. When GOP leaders huddled at a Capitol Hill steak house on the night of President Barack Obama's inauguration, Gingrich was there to advocate a strategy of complete obstruction. And when Senator Ted Cruz led a mob of Tea Party torchbearers in shutting down the government over Obamacare, Gingrich was there to argue that shutdowns are “a normal part of the constitutional process.”

Mickey Edwards, the Oklahoma Republican, who served in the House for 16 years, told me he believes Gingrich is responsible for turning Congress into a place where partisan allegiance is prized above all else. He noted that during Watergate, President Richard Nixon was forced to resign only because leaders of his own party broke ranks to hold him accountable—a dynamic Edwards views as impossible in the post-Gingrich era. “He created a situation where you now stand with your party at all costs and at all times, no matter what,” Edwards said. “Our whole system in America is based on the Madisonian idea of power checking power. Newt has been a big part of eroding that.”

But when I ask Gingrich what he thinks of the notion that he played a part in toxifying Washington, he bristles. “I took everything the Democrats had done brilliantly to dominate and taught Republicans how to do it,” he tells me. “Which made me a bad person because when Republicans dominate, it *must* be bad.” He adopts a singsong whine to imitate his critics in the political establishment: “‘Oh, the mean, nasty Republicans actually got to win, and we hate it, because we're a Democratic city, our real estate's based on big government, and the value of my house will go down if they balance the budget.’ That's the heart of this.”

These days, Gingrich seems to be revising his legacy in real time—shifting

As speaker, Gingrich reoriented the congressional schedule around filling campaign war chests, shortening the official work week to three days so that members had time to dial for dollars.



the story away from the ideological sea change that his populist disruption was supposed to enable, and toward the act of populist disruption itself. He places his own rise to power and Trump's in the same grand American narrative. There have been four great political "waves" in the past half century, he tells me: "Goldwater, Reagan, Gingrich, then Trump." But when I press him to explain what connects those four "waves" philosophically, the best he can do is say they were all "anti-liberal."

Political scientists who study our era of extreme polarization will tell you that the driving force behind American politics today is not actually partisanship, but negative partisanship—that is, hatred of the other team more than loyalty to one's own. Gingrich's speakership was both a symptom and an accelerant of that phenomenon.

On December 19, 1998, Gingrich cast his final vote as a congressman—a vote to impeach Bill Clinton for lying under oath about an affair. By the time it was revealed that the ex-speaker had been secretly carrying on an illicit relationship with a 23-year-old congressional aide named Callista throughout his impeachment crusade, almost no one was surprised. This was, after all, the same man who had famously been accused by his first wife (whom he'd met as a teenager, when she was his geometry teacher) of trying to discuss divorce terms when she was in the hospital recovering from tumor-removal surgery, the same man who had for a time reportedly restricted his extramarital dalliances to oral sex so that he could claim he'd never slept with another woman. (Gingrich declined to comment on these allegations.)

Detractors could call it hypocrisy if they wanted; Gingrich might not even argue. ("It doesn't matter what I do," he once rationalized, according to one of his ex-wives. "People need to hear what I have to say.") But if he had taught America one lesson, it was that any sin could be absolved, any trespass forgiven, as long as you picked the right targets and swung at them hard enough.

When Gingrich's personal life became an issue during his short-lived presidential campaign in 2012, he knew just who to swing at. Asked during a primary debate about an allegation that he'd requested an open marriage with his second wife, Gingrich took a deep breath, gathered all the righteous indignation he could muster, and let loose one of the most remarkable—and effective—non sequiturs in the history of campaign rhetoric: "I think the destructive, vicious, negative nature of much of the news media makes it harder to govern this country, harder to attract decent people to run for public office—and I am *appalled* that you would begin a presidential debate on a topic like that."

The CNN moderator grew flustered, the audience erupted in a standing ovation, and a few days later, the voters of South Carolina delivered Gingrich a decisive victory in the Republican primary.

AFTER A FEW HOURS at the zoo, Gingrich is ready for the next leg of our field trip, so we squeeze into the back of a black SUV and start driving across town toward the Academy of Natural Sciences, where there are some "really neat" dinosaur fossils he would like to show me.

One of the hard things about talking with Gingrich is that he weaves partisan attack lines into casual conversation so matter-of-factly—and so frequently—that after a while they begin to take on a white-noise quality. He will say something like "I mean, the party of socialism and anti-Semitism is probably not very desirable as a governing party," and you won't bother challenging him, or fact-checking him,



Gingrich says there have been four great political "waves" in the past half century: "Goldwater, Reagan, Gingrich, then Trump."

or arching an eyebrow—in fact, you might not even notice. His smarter-than-thou persona seems so impenetrable, his mind so unchangeable, that after a while you just give up on anything approaching a regular human conversation.

But the zoo appears to have put Gingrich in high spirits, and for the first time all day, he seems relaxed, loose, even a little gossipy. Slurping from a McDonald's cup as we ride through the streets of Philadelphia, he shares stray observations from the 2016 campaign trail—Trump really is a fast-food obsessive, Gingrich confides, but "I'm told they currently have him on a diet"—and tosses in a bit of Clinton concern-trolling for good measure.

"I've known Hillary since '93. I think it would be extraordinarily hard to be married to Bill Clinton and lose twice," he tells me. "It reinforces the whole sense that he was the real deal and

she wasn't." Alas, he says, it's been sad to see his old friend resort to bitter recriminations since her defeat. "The way she is handling it is self-destructive."

When Trump first began thinking seriously about running for president, he turned to Gingrich for advice. The two men had known each other for years—the Gingriches were members of Trump's golf club in Virginia—and one morning in January 2015 they found themselves in Des Moines, Iowa, for a conservative conference. Over breakfast at the downtown Marriott, Trump peppered Newt and Callista with questions about running for president—most pressingly, how much it would cost him to fund a campaign through the South Carolina primary. Gingrich estimated that it would take about \$70 million or \$80 million to be competitive.

As Gingrich tells it, Trump considered this and then replied, "Seventy to 80 million—that would be a yacht. This would be a lot more fun than a yacht!"

And so began the campaign that Gingrich would call "a watershed moment for America's future." Early on, Gingrich set himself apart from other prominent conservatives by talking up Trump's candidacy on TV and defending him against attacks from the GOP establishment. "Newt watched the Trump phenomenon take hold and metastasize, and he saw the parallels" to his own rise, says Kellyanne Conway, a senior adviser to the president who worked with Gingrich in the 1990s. "He recognized the echoes of 'You can't do this, this is a joke, you're unelectable, don't even try, you should be bowing to the people who have credentials.' Newt had heard that all before." Trump's response—to cast all his skeptics as part of the same corrupt class of insiders and crooks—borrowed from the strategy Gingrich had modeled, Conway told me: "Long before there was 'Drain the swamp,' there was Newt's 'Throw the bums out.'"

Once Trump clinched the nomination, he rewarded Gingrich by putting him on the vice-presidential short list. For a while it looked like it might really happen. Gingrich had the support of influential inner-circlers like Sean Hannity, who flew him out on a private jet to meet with

Trump on the campaign trail. But alas, a Trump-Gingrich ticket was not to be. There were, it turned out, certain optical issues that would have proved difficult to spin. As Ed Rollins, who ran a pro-Trump super PAC, put it at the time, "It'd be a ticket with six former wives, kind of like a Henry VIII thing."

After Trump was elected, Gingrich's name was floated for several high-profile administration posts. Eager to affirm his centrality in this hinge-of-history moment, he started publicly implying that he had turned down the job of secretary of state in favor of a sweeping, self-designed role with ambiguous responsibilities—"general planner," he called it, or "senior planner," or maybe "chief planner."

In fact, according to a transition official, Gingrich had little interest in giving up his lucrative private-sector side hustles, and

was never really in the running for a Cabinet position. Instead, he had two requests: that Trump's team leak that he was being considered for high office, and that Callista, a lifelong Catholic, be named ambassador to the Holy See. (Gingrich disputes this account.)

The Vatican gig was widely coveted, and there was some concern that Callista's public history of adultery would prompt the pope to reject her appointment. But the Gingriches were friendly with a number of American cardinals, and Callista's nomination sailed through. In Washington, the appointment was seen as a testament to the self-parodic nature of the Trump era—but in Rome, the arrangement has worked surprisingly well. Robert Mickens, a longtime Vatican journalist, told me that Callista is generally viewed as the ceremonial face of the embassy, while Newt—who told me he talks to the White House 10 to 15 times a week—acts as the "shadow ambassador."

Meanwhile, back in the States, Gingrich got to work marketing himself as the premier public intellectual of the Trump era. Ever since he was a young congressman, he had labored to cultivate a cerebral image, often schlepping piles of books into meetings on Capitol Hill. As an exercise in self-branding, at least, the effort seems to have worked: When I sent an email asking Paul Ryan what he thought of Gingrich, he responded with a pro forma statement describing the former speaker as an "ideas guy" twice in the space of six sentences.

Yet wading through Gingrich's various books, articles, and think-tank speeches about Trump, it is difficult to identify any coherent set of "ideas" animating his support for the president. He is not a natural booster for the economic nationalism espoused by people like Steve Bannon, nor does he seem particularly smitten with the isolationism Trump championed on the stump.

Instead, Gingrich seems drawn to Trump the larger-than-life leader—virile and masculine, dynamic and strong, brimming with "total energy" as he mows down every enemy in his path. "Donald Trump is the grizzly bear in *The Revenant*," Gingrich gushed during

It is difficult to identify any coherent set of ideas animating Gingrich's support for the president.

a December 2016 speech on "The Principles of Trumpism" at the Heritage Foundation. "If you get his attention, he will get awake ... He will walk over, bite your face off, and sit on you."

In Trump, Gingrich has found the apotheosis of the primate politics he has been practicing his entire life—nasty, vicious, and unconcerned with those pesky "Boy Scout words" as he fights in the Darwinian struggle that is American life today. "Trump's America and the post-American society that the anti-Trump coalition represents are incapable of coexisting," Gingrich writes in his most recent book. "One will simply defeat the other. There is no room for compromise. Trump has understood this perfectly since day one."

For much of 2018, Gingrich has been channeling his energies toward shaping the GOP's midterm strategy—writing messaging



memos and fielding phone calls from candidates across the country. (During one early-morning meeting a couple of months after our zoo trip, our conversation is repeatedly interrupted by Gingrich's cellphone blaring the '70s disco song "Dancing Queen," his chosen ringtone.) Gingrich tells me he's advising party leaders to "stick to really big themes" in their midterm messaging, and then offers the following as examples: "Tax cuts lead to economic growth"; "We need work rather than welfare"; "MS-13 is really bad."

He predicts that if Democrats win back the House, they will try to impeach Trump—but he is bullish about the president's chances of survival.

"The problem the Democrats are gonna have is really simple," he tells me. "Everything they're gonna charge Trump with will be irrelevant to most Americans." He says that most of the "explosive revelations" that have come out of the Russia investigation are unintelligible to the average person. "You're driving your kids to soccer, you're worried about your mom in the nursing home, and you're thinking about your job, and you're going, *This is Washington crap.*"

I ask Gingrich whether he, as someone who follows Washington crap rather closely and does not have kids to drive to soccer, worries at all about the mounting evidence of coordination between Russians and the Trump campaign.

Gingrich guffaws. "The idea that you would worry about what [Michael] Cohen said, or what some porn star may or may not have done before she was arrested by the Cincinnati police"—he is revving up now, and his voice is getting higher—"I mean, this whole thing is a parody! I tell everybody: We live in the age of the Kardashians. This is all Kardashian politics. Noise followed by noise followed by hysteria followed by more noise, creating big enough celebrity status so you can sell the hats with your name on it and become a millionaire."

This sounds like it's intended as a criticism of our political culture, but given his loyalty to Trump—arguably the world's most successful practitioner of "Kardashian politics"—I can't quite tell. When I point out the apparent dissonance, Gingrich is ready with a counter.

"If you want to see genius, look at the hat," he tells me. "What does the hat say?"

"Make America great again?" I respond.

Gingrich nods triumphantly, as though he's just achieved checkmate. "*It doesn't say Donald Trump.*"

A FEW HOURS AFTER parting ways with Gingrich, I take my seat in a cavernous downtown-Philadelphia theater, where more than 2,000 people are waiting to hear him speak. The crowd of mostly white, mostly well-dressed attendees isn't particularly partisan—the event is part of a lecture series that includes speakers like Gloria Steinem and Dave Barry—but at this moment of political upheaval, they seem eager to hear from a seasoned Washington insider.

Shortly after 8 o'clock, Gingrich takes the stage. "How many of you find what's going on kind of confusing?" he asks. "Raise your hand." Hundreds of hands go up, as laughter ripples across the theater. "Any of you who do not find this confusing," he says, "are delusional."

And yet, over the next 75 minutes, Gingrich doesn't offer much clarity. Instead, he begins with a travelogue of his day at the zoo

("It was a wonderful break from that *other* zoo!"), and then lurches into a rambling story about the T. rex skull he used to display in his office when he was speaker. He reminisces about *Time* making him Man of the Year in 1995, and spends several minutes describing the technological advancements in private space travel, a favorite hobbyhorse of his. At one point, he pauses to lavish praise on the restaurant scene in Rome; at another, he simply starts listing impressive titles he has held over the course of his career.

"Donald Trump is the grizzly bear in *The Revenant*," Gingrich once gushed. "If you get his attention, he will get awake ... He will walk over, bite your face off, and sit on you."

From my seat in the balcony, I'm struck by how thoroughly Gingrich seems to be enjoying himself—not just onstage, but in the luxurious quasi-retirement he has carved out. He is dabbling in geopolitics, dining in fine Italian restaurants. When he feels like traveling, he crisscrosses the Atlantic in business class, opining on the issues of the day from bicontinental TV studios and giving speeches for \$600 a minute. There is time for reading, and writing, and midday zoo trips—and even he will admit, "It's a very fun life." The world may be burning, but Newt Gingrich is enjoying the spoils.

As he nears the end of his remarks, Gingrich adopts a somber tone. "I will tell you," he says, "I could never quite have imagined our political structure being as chaotic as it currently is ... I could never quite have imagined the kind of political gridlock that we've gotten into."

For a moment, it sounds almost as if Gingrich is on the brink of a confession—an acknowledgment of what he has wrought; an apology, perhaps, for setting us on this course. But it turns out he is just setting up an attack line aimed at congressional Democrats for opposing a Republican spending bill. I should have known.

By the time Gingrich shuffles offstage, many in the audience seem to have lost patience with him. As we file out of the theater, I catch snippets of grumpy reviews: *Waste of time ... He didn't even answer the questions ... The last speaker was much better ...* One man grumbles, "I think that guy's done more to fuck up our democracy than anyone."

That may seem like an overly harsh assessment. But tomorrow morning, when these people turn on the news, they will see footage of a reckless president who ascended to the White House on the power of televised politics. In a few months, their airwaves will be polluted with nasty attack ads. They will read stories about partisan impeachment efforts, and looming government shutdowns, and lawmakers more adept at name-calling than passing legislation. And though he won't be there to say it in person, Gingrich will be somewhere out in the world—at a trattoria along Via Veneto, or perched comfortably in a cable-news greenroom—thinking, *You're welcome.* ■

McKay Coppins is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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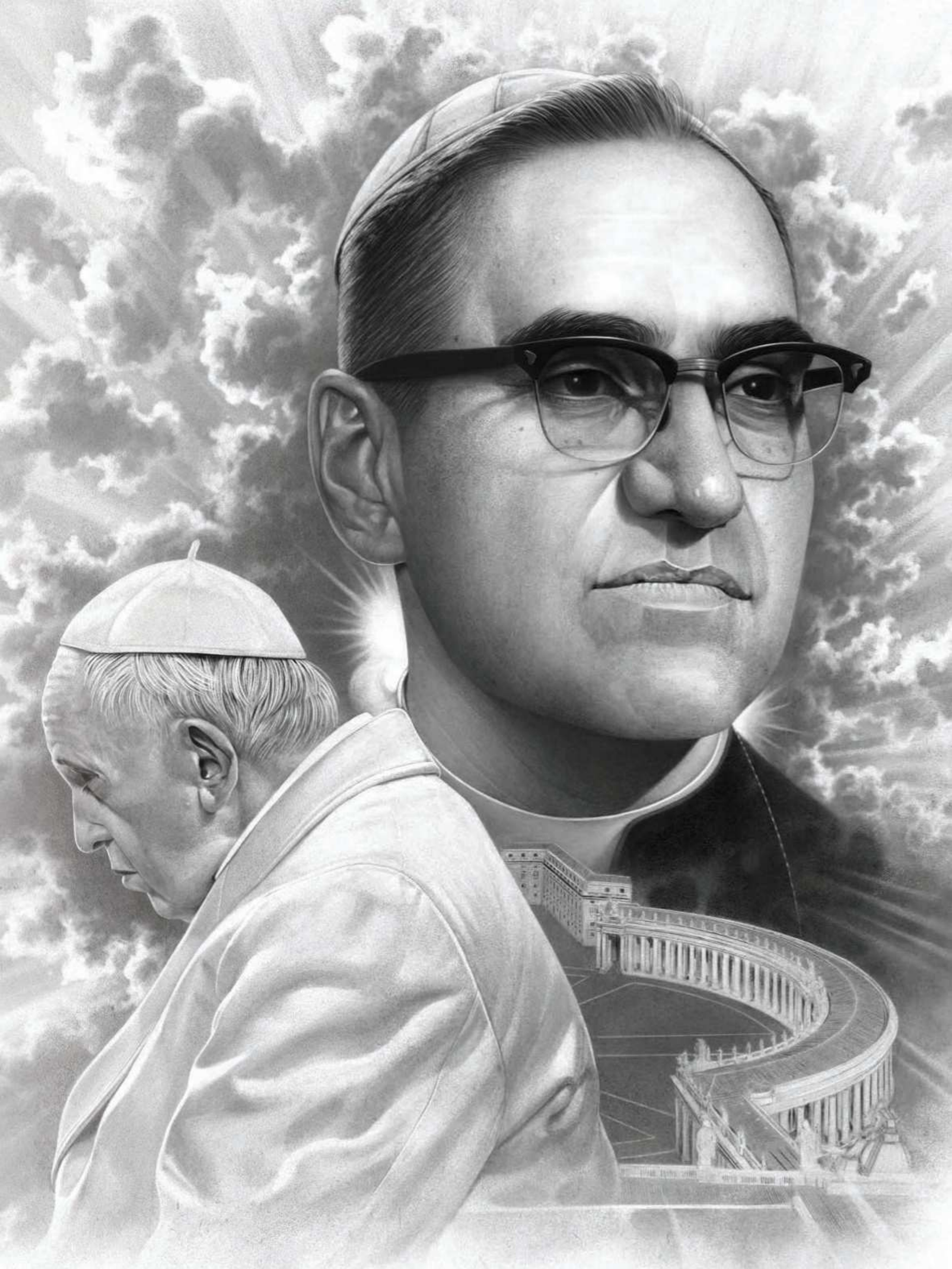
The MARTYR

WHAT THE CANONIZATION OF ÓSCAR ROMERO SAYS ABOUT
THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND ITS EMBATTLED LEADER

and the

By **Paul Elie**
Illustration by **Boris Pelcer**

POPE



“I IMPLORE YOU, I BEG YOU, I ORDER YOU, IN THE NAME OF GOD: STOP THE REPRESSION!”

When the archbishop denounced the military government for its campaign of violence against its opponents—and called on soldiers carrying out the violence to disobey orders—some men in the military decided that it was time to kill him. El Salvador was on the brink of civil war—it was March of 1980—and the archbishop had made his plea in a Sunday homily broadcast nationwide on the radio. He was asking for trouble; he deserved to be killed. The killing itself was easy. The next day’s newspaper named the chapel where the archbishop would be saying Mass that evening. The archbishop disregarded advice to stay home. The assassins drew lots to determine who would be the gunman. As the archbishop read the Gospel, the assassins pulled up to the chapel. As he raised the consecrated bread and wine, the gunman fired a shot to the heart.

Nearly four decades later, Pope Francis has declared Óscar Romero a saint. An archbishop murdered at the altar, in the manner of England’s Thomas Becket, would seem a simple case. But Romero’s path to canonization—at an October ceremony at Saint Peter’s Basilica, in Rome—has been tortuous. More than 100,000 people thronged the cathedral plaza in San Salvador for Romero’s funeral, and yet the papal representative to El Salvador and all but one of the country’s remaining bishops stayed away, cowed by the regime and the Vatican alike. As the murdered man became the face of a “people’s Catholicism” in Latin America—a saint by acclamation—Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI slow-walked the official canonization process, precisely because of what the archbishop represented.

For the Catholic left, Romero’s assassination is as epochal as Martin Luther King Jr.’s, and his canonization—long awaited—is apt. At a moment when bishops in the United States and around the world are being called to account for their criminal cover-up of priestly sexual abuse, Óscar Romero stands in stark contrast as a bishop who strove to be holy by being accountable—a voice for the voiceless rather than for the Church and its patrons. To celebrate Romero, the Church has to address unholy episodes in its past—episodes as troubling, in their own way, as the current sexual-abuse scandal. The canonization also forces us to consider Francis in a different light—as a figure scarred by Latin American politics and his own encounter with fear and violence, compromise and complicity.

THE POPE FRANCIS depicted in the North American media since his 2013 election is largely a figure in the culture wars—conflicts fought over issues such as divorce, homosexuality, gay marriage, and the Church in a diverse society. The issues are different in Latin America. As the first pope from the region, the former Jorge Mario Bergoglio has inherited the Catholic Church’s 500-year history as

handmaiden to local oligarchs, dictators, and military strongmen. In Latin America, in his lifetime, the Church and its leaders have figured directly not just in the culture wars but in *actual* wars: in Guatemala, Brazil, Chile, and Nicaragua; in Argentina, the pope’s native land, whose so-called Dirty War ensnared Bergoglio and his fellow Jesuits; and in El Salvador.

The role of archbishop of San Salvador in the mid-1970s was all but impossible. The archbishop was expected to serve the interests of the people, the ruling oligarchy of landowning families, the local Church, the Vatican, and even the United States, which funded El Salvador’s military.

Romero’s appointment, in February 1977, coincided with troubled times: The country faced a growing concentration of power in the military; torture and threats of torture against campesinos who sought concessions from landowners; and a government-backed campaign against activist clergy. In a country named for Jesus—*El Salvador* means “The Savior”—fliers were passed out urging, “Be a patriot. Kill a priest.”

Romero did not start out as a leftist reformer. Born in 1917, the second of eight children, he entered a seminary in El Salvador when he was 13 and was eventually ordained in Rome, at the age of 24. To the people in his parishes, he was a down-to-earth pastor; to his fellow priests, he was an organization man—a “stickler,” one associate recalled. When the Second Vatican Council relaxed the dress code for priests, he continued to wear a long cassock (and disdained priests who did not). As the auxiliary bishop of San Salvador, he was an episcopal bureaucrat, consumed with paperwork. He shifted the content of the weekly archdiocesan newspaper from calls for social justice to calls for personal improvement, honing in on drug use, promiscuity, and alcoholism. He faulted the Jesuits at Central American University for promoting “political theology” and defended the government’s armed occupation of the University of El Salvador on the grounds that the school was a hotbed of Marxism. He made his weekly confession to a priest who was a member of the secretive traditionalist movement Opus Dei. But for all that, he was not doctrinaire. In 1968, an epochal conference of Latin American bishops held in Medellín, Colombia, dramatically sharpened the Church’s commitment to social justice; Romero sought a middle ground between the “Medellínistas” and the Salvadoran oligarchy. The Vatican,

noting his moderation, installed him as archbishop—after the oligarchy signed off.

Three weeks later, a Jesuit priest named Rutilio Grande and two companions were murdered in Aguilar, a village outside the capital, where Grande had been organizing sugarcane workers. Grande was a friend of Romero's—they had lived in the same seminary in the early 1970s, often taking meals together. The new archbishop went to Aguilar to pray over Grande's bullet-riddled body. Romero, one priest would recall, had previously been "reluctant to go through the door of history God was opening up for him"—but now he did. He returned to San Salvador a changed man, vowing that he and the Church would not take part in any official government ceremony until the killing was dealt with. He canceled all scheduled Masses the following Sunday, replacing them with a single *misa única* in the cathedral in memory of the slain men. That morning, 100,000 Catholics gathered outside the cathedral.

Romero lived modestly. For his quarters he took a bungalow on the grounds of a hospital. He declined to make use of a luxury car and driver. He opened the chancery to poor people, who came to him with their problems. As the military regime's repression escalated—priests murdered, campesinos "disappeared," protesters massacred—he condemned from within the Church the "social sin" perpetuated by the government and the ruling class, whom he accused of "paying to kill the voice that speaks out." He used his Sunday homilies to report on people murdered or kidnapped, identifying each by name. He made the archdiocese's radio station, YSAX, an alternative to state-controlled media. Once an organization man, Romero now found his brother bishops writing to Rome to complain about

May 1979: Less than a year before his murder, Archbishop Óscar Romero appeals to the international community for help in ending government repression in El Salvador.

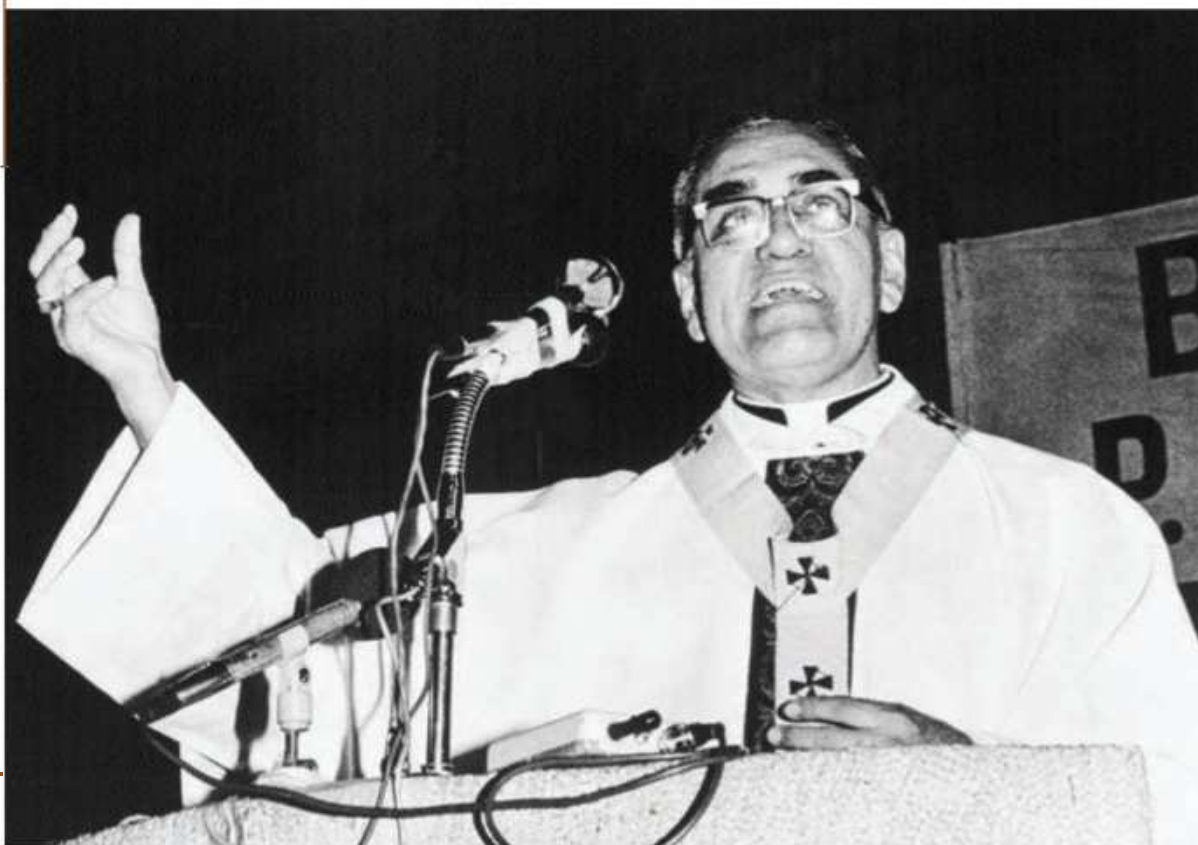
him. In February 1978, Georgetown University, a Jesuit institution in Washington, D.C., decided to give Romero an honorary degree. The Vatican sought to stop it, but the university stood its ground.

Karol Wojtyła was elected pope that fall. As the archbishop of Kraków, he had set the Church against Communism in the Soviet bloc; as Pope John Paul II, he set the Church against Latin America's liberation theology, which mounted a wide-ranging critique of entrenched social structures in the region and called upon the Church to cast its lot, in word and in deed, with the poor and the powerless. Romero had not read much liberation theology, but he made common cause with its advocates. The Vatican sent a bishop from Argentina to "check on" Romero. It began planning for his removal. When threatened campesinos occupied churches to protect themselves, he supported them. When the president of El Salvador failed to stop the murders of priests and laity, Romero excommunicated him.

Washington was watching, too. Under President Jimmy Carter, the State Department and the Pentagon were working with the Salvadoran government. When the Marx-inspired Sandinista rebels came to power in neighboring Nicaragua (and appointed four priests to the cabinet), many in official Washington feared that El Salvador was next. The Carter administration pursued a quixotic policy toward the country: denouncing the government's human-rights violations while funding its lawless military. The undersecretary of state for the region derided Romero as "a weak archbishop strongly influenced by an idealistic but naïve Jesuit cadre."

After a so-called bloodless coup by the military in 1979, the government's war on its opponents grew even more brutal. Campesinos were murdered at the rate of more than 300 a month. Priests continued to be killed. Romero had observed that his role was "to tend the wounds ... pick up the bodies"; now he presided over funeral after funeral. With the U.S. Congress set to renew funding for the Salvadoran military, he wrote a letter to Carter imploring him to end the funding. Romero read the letter aloud in the cathedral and over YSAX, whose facilities were soon bombed. He refused to hire a bodyguard or wear a bulletproof vest. Why should he be protected when the campesinos were not?

To celebrate Romero, the Church has to address unholy episodes in its past—episodes as troubling, in their own way, as the current sexual-abuse scandal.



Romero's letter to Carter circulated among the president's staff. The national-security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski—Polish-born, anti-Communist—reached out to John Paul, asking him to compel Romero to tone things down. The new U.S. ambassador to El Salvador, Robert White, saw things differently. White described the military regime as a “right-wing Murder Incorporated.” In a State Department communiqué he remarked, “Probably the most serious threat to a moderate solution would be the assassination ... of Archbishop Romero, the most important political figure in El Salvador.”

YSAX's transmitter was eventually repaired, and on Sunday, March 23, 1980, in an hour-long homily broadcast across Central America, Romero begged the military regime to “stop the repression!” The next day he was dead.

P OPE FRANCIS HAS HAD Romero in mind ever since his election. After taking the name of a saint who served the poor—Francis of Assisi—he spurned the papal palace, opting to live in a guesthouse. He rides in a Fiat, not a luxury car. He is open, bold, improvisatory. He has likened the Church to “a field hospital after battle,” called in to bind up the wounds left by society.

But he was not always this way. In Argentina he was known as dour and cautious, a loner, sometimes a scold. Two decades younger than Romero, Bergoglio made his final vows as a Jesuit in Buenos Aires in April 1973, at age 36. Two months later, he was named the provincial, or regional leader, of the Jesuits in Argentina—a young conservative appointed to counter the surging progressivism of the order. His profile then was strikingly akin to Romero's at the same moment: making priests wear clerical collars (and wearing a collar and a cassock himself), favoring traditional devotions over Vatican II innovations, standing against liberation theology, and staying on gracious good terms with the authoritarian Catholics who ran the country. He didn't vote. He sometimes wore gold-embroidered vestments when celebrating Mass, explaining that ordinary people liked “a touch of Evita” in their liturgy. Some of his fellow Jesuits wrote to Rome to complain about him.

In 1976 he faced a test of his leadership. Inspired by the Medellín declaration on social justice, two other Jesuits had founded a community in a shantytown of Buenos Aires, living among the poor and among Marxist guerrillas, which some interpreted as tantamount to supporting terrorists. Bergoglio had been their student. Now he was their superior. Following an order, he said, from Pedro Arrupe, the leader of the Jesuits in Rome, he told the two Jesuits that they had to choose between the community, with its politically provocative agenda, and the Jesuit order. They refused to give up their work. He invited them to stay at the Jesuit house in Buenos Aires. They declined. Bergoglio warned them to be “very careful.”

The coup came five days later. The Jesuits were hauled from their dwelling in the shantytown—two of some 150 priests taken in the Dirty War that followed. The men were stripped, shackled, hooded, and tortured for five days, then relocated and kept blindfolded. They became convinced that Bergoglio had either turned them in or acquiesced to their abduction.

Had he? Almost certainly not. But he had been careless. Carrying out the dismissal, he had left the priests without

Sainthood for the archbishop forces us to consider Francis in a different light—as a figure scarred by Latin American politics and his own encounter with fear and violence, compromise and complicity.

institutional protection. In the flurry of paperwork and consultation, he had somehow drawn the regime's attention to the two men. In any case, once they were taken, he worked for their release. The priests were eventually let go—drugged and dumped on a remote stretch outside of Buenos Aires, but alive after a five-month ordeal. Bergoglio's efforts likely helped secure their release. In the terrifying period that followed, as the Dirty War escalated, Bergoglio arranged protection for other people threatened by the regime. He got them passage out of the country on flights to Brazil. He put them up at the Colegio Máximo, claiming that they were there to undergo the Jesuits' famous “long retreat.” On one occasion he gave a man his own government ID, and the man escaped as Padre Bergoglio, in a black suit and clerical collar.

That is what Jorge Bergoglio did. What he did not do was openly oppose or denounce the repressive government in Argentina in the late 1970s—the very time when Óscar Romero was opposing and denouncing the repressive government in El Salvador, a stand he paid for with his life.

The Dirty War in Argentina went on until 1983. Up to 30,000 civilians were killed or “disappeared.” Bergoglio, after two terms as provincial, was named the rector of the Jesuit seminary. He remained fundamentally conservative, and as a result proved divisive. He was sent on sabbaticals to Ireland and West Germany and eventually posted to the Argentine mountain town of Córdoba—a move intended as informal exile—until he was called back to Buenos Aires in 1992, where he became an auxiliary bishop and then the archbishop. The archbishop who called him back was the same man the Vatican had sent to El Salvador to check on Romero.

After Bergoglio's election as pope, some Argentines revived the accusations that he had betrayed the two Jesuits and had ignored the entreaties of the “Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo,” a group devoted to reuniting children whose parents had been disappeared during the Dirty War with their blood relatives. In a lengthy interview published soon after he became pope, Francis spoke remorsefully about his efforts in the 1970s. “My style of government as a Jesuit at the beginning had many faults,” he said. “I found myself provincial when I was still very young. I was only 36 years old. That was crazy. I had to deal with difficult situations, and I made my decisions abruptly and by myself ... My authoritarian and quick manner of making decisions led me to have serious problems.”

He had changed in the decades since then. The change had begun during the Dirty War and it had deepened during his time in Córdoba. He returned to Buenos Aires a humbler man, and one squarely on the side of the poor. He lived in spartan quarters. He took the subway and bus. He walked the slums. When the bishops of Latin America convened in Brazil in 2007, Bergoglio, entrusted to write the official statement about the meeting, called for the Church to become “a traveling companion of our poorest brothers and sisters, even as far as martyrdom.” In the years after Romero's death, the murdered archbishop of San Salvador had become an inspiration to the archbishop of Buenos

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Aires. Bergoglio said of Romero in 2007, “If I were pope, I would have already canonized him.” It was the future pope’s rebuke to his two predecessors, who felt that Romero—in death as in life—needed to be restrained.

POPE JOHN PAUL II visited El Salvador in 1983. That he went at all took courage: The region was in a state of war. He had just visited Nicaragua—where he bellowed “*Silencio!*” after he was heckled during an open-air Mass—and tensions were high. Terror threats called into question his plan to pray at Óscar Romero’s tomb, in the crypt below the cathedral. He went and prayed anyway.

Robert White, the U.S. ambassador, had seen Romero as essential to any peaceful way forward in El Salvador. He proved prophetic. The assassination of Romero presaged a civil war that would last 12 years and leave up to 80,000 dead and 8,000 disappeared. Progressive Catholics were targets. Four American churchwomen were raped and murdered. Six Jesuits, their housekeeper, and her daughter were shot point-blank by members of a paramilitary group, who also trained their guns on a poster of Archbishop Romero that was hanging on the wall.

John Paul visited El Salvador again, in 1996. He again knelt at Romero’s tomb. But he declined to visit the chapel where Romero had been murdered, and he was not eager to see Romero canonized: Better to wait a couple of decades, he believed, until the war was over and Romero’s political charisma had dimmed. John Paul’s go-slow approach gave cover to subordinates who opposed Romero’s canonization on theological and political grounds. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the rigorist prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, sought to suppress liberation theology, and Romero was seen as implicated by association. Cardinal Alfonso López Trujillo, of Colombia, another archconservative, stated that Romero was not a true martyr, because he had been killed for political reasons, not religious ones. The ties between the Church and Latin American elites proved hard to break.

El Salvador’s civil war ended in 1992 with a rough-and-ready peace accord, and five years later John Paul and Ratzinger allowed the “cause” for Romero to be opened in Rome. A youngish Italian monsignor was made postulator—the man with the job of seeing the matter through. It would not be easy. The process was held up at every stage—by the bishops in El Salvador, and in Rome by the bishops’ office, by the clergy office, and, in 1998, by Ratzinger and the doctrinal office, which wanted to review Romero’s homilies for traces of Marxism. Six years passed. Then Ratzinger announced another delay, so that Vatican clerics could “delve deeper” into Romero’s writings. Pope John Paul II died. Ratzinger became Pope Benedict XVI. Seven more years passed. John Paul was canonized. At last, after meeting with the postulator—who by now was a white-haired bishop—Benedict approved the cause. Then he resigned. Bergoglio was elected pope. Three weeks later, Óscar Romero was authorized for canonization.

On one level, the canonization represents a wrong finally righted. On another, it is an occasion for Francis to confront the darkness of the late 1970s—the struggles he faced, the decisions he made. There is no one right way for religious leaders to challenge repressive governments in every circumstance. Francis is now taking a conciliatory approach with China, for example, remaining quiet on human rights in order to gain space for the



May 2015:
Thousands gather
in El Salvador's
capital to cel-
ebrate Romero's
beatification—
a key step on
the way to official
canonization.

Church to operate there. And outspokenness, for its part, is not guaranteed to bring results. But this canonization marks a real change: After centuries of cozying up to strongmen, the Vatican has legitimated Romero’s way of denunciation and confrontation, recognizing that it is not the path of a reckless maverick.

Pope Francis, greeting pilgrims from El Salvador in the fall of 2015, went off script to speak candidly about Romero’s posthumous ordeal, making clear that he laid the blame for the long delay not on Central American despots but on princes of the Church, whom he placed among Romero’s persecutors: “He was defamed, slandered, soiled—that is, his martyrdom continued even by his brothers in the priesthood and in the episcopate.”

He went on to lament that the same posthumous fate had been suffered by Rutilio Grande, the Jesuit organizer of poor agricultural workers whose murder in 1977 prompted Romero to commit his life to social justice. Asked once about prospects for Romero’s canonization, Francis had said, “Yes, yes, yes ... And right after that comes Rutilio Grande.” Typically, a candidate for sainthood must be associated with miracles. Francis responded to that notion in a brief encounter with Grande’s biographer two years later. He said, “Rutilio Grande’s great miracle is Óscar Romero.” **A**

Paul Elie, a senior fellow at Georgetown University’s Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, is the author of The Life You Save May Be Your Own and Reinventing Bach.

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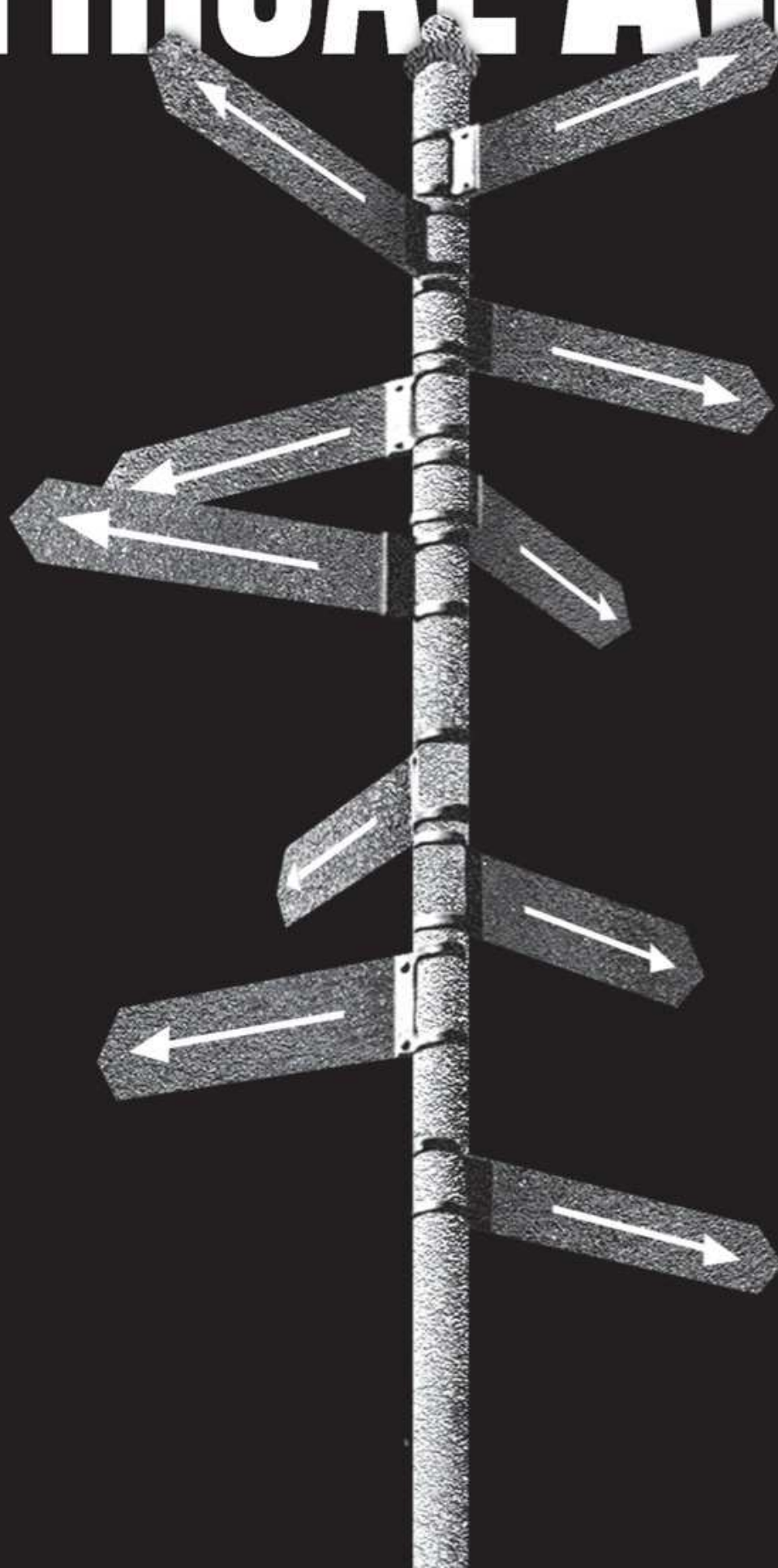
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CAN WE BUILD ETHICAL A.I.?



**A.I. WILL SOLVE
SOME OF
OUR BIGGEST
PROBLEMS.**

**HOW DO WE
STOP IT FROM
CREATING
NEW ONES?**

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) HAS the potential to advance education, healthcare, politics, national security, criminal justice, and so much more. A world powered by AI is within reach, and its applications will impact everyone. But experts know we shouldn't just ask how AI can make us better: We need to consider the reverse. Data bias, lack of transparency, inequitable distribution—these fundamental flaws in AI could lead to system-wide lapses in judgment. And that means all of us in the public and private sectors should devote as much energy to educating ourselves about AI as we are to developing it.

WHY THE BLACK BOX MUST BE DEMYSTIFIED

Much of that education starts with the material we use to build it: AI is what it eats. Feed an AI system biased data, and it will likely make biased decisions. In 2016, it took less than 24 hours for an AI-powered Twitter account to turn into a hateful, insulting troll. And the most advanced AI-driven facial-recognition algorithms—constructed with data from its largely white and male developers—still struggle to even acknowledge the faces of women and people of color.

Education goes beyond picking the right materials for AI: It's also about understanding how AI thinks. Many engineers still don't fully understand how and why AI comes to decisions—and the potential results could be alarming, if AI is tasked with firing a missile or diagnosing a disease. If we're to entrust AI with decisions of that significance, we need to have a comprehensive grasp on the processes and factors that inform its judgment.

THIS IS THE MOMENT TO DECIDE THE NATURE OF A.I.

In *Moral Code*, a documentary produced by Atlantic Re:think and Hewlett Packard Enterprise (HPE), we heard from experts such as Wait But Why co-founder Tim

Urban and Beena Ammanath, VP of AI at Hewlett Packard Enterprise, and they all emphasized the same thing: We've arrived at an inflection point. Computing systems with enough power to host AI algorithms are in hand, meaning that AI is no longer a concept but a reality. That's why it's time to ask: How can we build AI that embodies the best of humanity rather than the worst?

Everyone, including business executives exploring AI and individual citizens learning about how their data are being used, needs to take responsibility for answering that question. Around the world, organizations are stepping up: Earlier this year, the upper house of the British Parliament released a nearly-200-page report on the potential consequences of widespread AI. It recommends greater public oversight of the data used to construct AI, reviews of preexisting AI systems, and responsible, regulated investment in AI projects. And in April, an international group of organizations including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch banded together to write the Toronto Declaration on Machine Learning, which recommends that we use international human-rights laws as a framework for the ethical development of AI.

If we all take action to ensure that it's developed thoughtfully and equitably, AI could help us reach new heights, perhaps by finding the cure for cancer or by furthering deep-space exploration. But there is inherent risk in the construction of a hyper-efficient, hyper-intelligent entity of any kind, and to ignore it—to choose not to identify and address that risk—would be a fatal human error. ▣

Moral Code expands on these questions and more. To watch the full eight-minute video, go to theatlantic.com/ethicsofai.

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AFFECT A.I.
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PRICEWATERHOUSECOOPERS





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BY ALEXIS C. MADRIGAL



A boisterous new age
of global children's
entertainment has arrived—
and it's not at all what
we adults were expecting.

ILLUSTRATION BY MAX GUTHER



the company responsible for some of the most widely viewed toddler content on YouTube, has a suitably cute origin story. Vinoth Chandar, the CEO, had always played around on YouTube, making Hindu devotionals and little videos of his father, a well-known Indian music producer. But after he and his wife had a baby daughter, whom they nicknamed “Chu Chu,” he realized he had a new audience—of one. He drew a Chu Chu-like character in Flash, the animation program, and then created a short video of the girl dancing to the popular and decidedly unwoke Indian nursery rhyme “Chubby Cheeks.” (“Curly hair, very fair / Eyes are blue, lovely too / Teacher’s pet, is that you?”)

Chu Chu loved it. “She wanted me to repeat it again and again,” Chandar recalls. Which gave him an idea: “If she is going to like it, the kids around the world should like it.” He created a YouTube channel and uploaded the video. In a few weeks, it had 300,000 views. He made and uploaded another video, based on “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,” and it took off. After posting just two videos, he had 5,000 subscribers to his channel. Someone from YouTube reached out and, as Chandar remembers it, said, “You guys are doing some magic with your content.” So Chandar and several of his friends formed a company in Chennai, in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, from the bones of an IT business they’d run. They hired a few animators and started putting out a video a month.

Five years on, ChuChu TV is a fast-growing threat to traditional competitors, from *Sesame Street* to Disney to Nickelodeon. With all its decades of episodes, well-known characters, and worldwide brand recognition, *Sesame Street* has more than 5 billion views on YouTube. That’s impressive, but ChuChu has more than 19 billion. *Sesame Street*’s main feed has 4 million subscribers; the original ChuChu TV channel has 19 million—placing it among the top 25 most watched YouTube channels in the world, according to the social-media-tracking site Social Blade—and its subsidiary channels (primarily ChuChu TV Surprise Eggs Toys and ChuChu TV Español) have another 10 million.

According to ChuChu, its two largest markets are the United States and India, which together generate about one-third of its views. But each month tens of millions of views also pour in from the U.K., Canada, Mexico, Australia, and all over Asia and Africa. Roughly 20 million times a day, a caretaker somewhere on Earth fires up YouTube and plays a ChuChu video. What began as a lark has grown into something very, very big, inflating the company’s ambitions. “We want to be the next Disney,” Chandar told me.

But whereas Disney has long mined cultures across the world for legends and myths—dropping them into consumerist,

→
**ChuChu TV
employs about
200 people;
its headquarters,
in Chennai, India,
is full of big,
colorful flourishes
that signify “fun
tech office!”**

family-friendly American formats—ChuChu’s videos are a different kind of hybrid. The company ingests Anglo-American nursery rhymes and holidays, and produces new versions with subcontinental flair. The characters’ most prominent animal friend is a unicorn-elephant. Nursery rhymes become music videos, complete with Indian dances and iconography. Kids of all skin tones and hair types speak with an Indian accent.

Many observers respond to ChuChu’s unexpected success by implying that the company has somehow gamed the system. “Whenever we go to the U.S.,” Chandar told me, “people say, ‘You guys cracked the algorithm.’ But we didn’t do anything. The algorithm thing is a complete myth.”

ChuChu does not employ the weird keyword-stuffed titles used by lower-rent YouTube channels. The company’s titles are simple, sunny, consistent. Its theory of media is that good stuff wins, which is why its videos have won. “We know what our subscribers want, and we give it to them,” Chandar said. ChuChu says it adds roughly 40,000 subscribers a day.

That kind of growth suggests something unpredictable and wild is happening: America’s grip on children’s entertainment is coming to an end. ChuChu is but the largest of a new constellation of children’s-media brands on YouTube that is spread out across the world: Little Baby Bum in London, Animaccord Studios in Moscow, Videogyan in Bangalore, Billion Surprise Toys in Dubai, TuTiTu TV in Tel Aviv, and LooLoo Kids in Iași, a Romanian town near the country’s border with Moldova. The new children’s media look nothing like what we adults would have expected. They are exuberant, cheap, weird, and multicultural. YouTube’s content for young kids—what I think of as Toddler YouTube—is a mishmash, a bricolage, a trash fire, an explosion of creativity. It’s a largely unregulated, data-driven grab for toddlers’ attention, and, as we’ve seen with the rest of social media, its ramifications may be deeper and wider than you’d initially think.

With two small kids in my own house, I haven’t been navigating this new world as a theoretical challenge. My youngest, who is 2, can rarely sustain the attention to watch the Netflix shows we put on for my 5-year-old son. But when I showed her a ChuChu video, just to see how she’d react, I practically had to wrestle my phone away from her. What was this stuff? Why did it have the effect it did?

To find out, I had to go to Chennai.



Sesame Street has more than 5 billion views on YouTube. ChuChu has more than 19 billion.

Uber in Chennai is essentially the same as Uber in Oakland, California, where I live. In the airport I hit a button on my phone, and soon a white sedan pulled up outside. My driver was a student who had come to Chennai to break into Tollywood. Yes, Tollywood: *T* for Telugu, the language spoken by 75 million people, mostly in South India.

The driver dropped me off just south of the center of the city, in an area of new high-rises that overlook Srinivasapuram, a fishing village on the Bay of Bengal. The village hangs on to the edge of the city, which has been modernizing fast; the government has been trying to relocate the village for years. From my hotel, I watched tiny figures wander over to the Adyar River estuary and squat, staring up at the opulence of the new Chennai.

ChuChu's headquarters take up the entire first floor of a blue-glass building with bright-yellow stripes. Rows of animators flank a center aisle that houses big, colorful flourishes—weird chairs, structural columns with graffiti on them—signifying “fun tech office!” The work floor is ringed by maybe 10 offices that house the higher-ups. ChuChu says it employs about 200 people.

Chandar met me and led me into a massive conference room. In addition to being the CEO, he also composes music for ChuChu. He's the public face of the company and, at 39, a few years younger than the other four founders, who each hold an equal stake. He sent a young man to get me a coffee, and then we sat down together with his friend B. M. Krishnan, a former accountant and a ChuChu co-founder who is now the company's chief creative officer.

It was after Krishnan joined the creative team, Chandar told me, that ChuChu really began to achieve global popularity. What made the difference, in part, was that Krishnan decided to rewrite nursery rhymes that he felt didn't end well or teach good morals. What if Jack and Jill, after falling down while fetching the pail of water, get back up, learn from the resilience of birds and ants, actually get the damn pail of water, and give it to their

mom? “It was ‘Jack and Jill 2.0,’” Chandar said. “I thought, *This is how a nursery rhyme should be.*”

After Krishnan rewrote a nursery rhyme, Chandar would then take the lyrics and compose music around them. The songs are simple, but if you hear them once, you will hear them for the rest of your life. Krishnan would storyboard the videos, imagining the sequence of shots, as befitting his youthful dream of becoming a movie director. ChuChu productions are essentially music videos for kids, sometimes featuring Tollywood dance moves that Chandar and Krishnan demonstrate for the animators.

The ChuChu guys didn’t set out to make educational programming. They were just making videos for fun. How were they to know they’d become a global force in children’s entertainment? As time went on and the staff expanded, the company created a teaching series, called Learning English Is Fun, and worked with a preschool company to develop an app, ChuChu School, that has an explicitly didactic purpose. But generally speaking, Chandar and Krishnan just wanted their videos to be wholesome—to deliver entertainment that perhaps provided kids with a dose of moral instruction.

Krishnan had no experience other than his own parenting. But if whatever he did as a parent worked for his kids, he felt, why wouldn’t it work for everyone? For example, when he taught his kids left from right, he liked to do it in the car, when they were in the back seat. That way, if he pointed left, it was left for them, too. So when ChuChu made a video teaching the left-right concept, it made sure to always show the characters from behind, not mirrored, so that when a character pointed left, the kids watching would understand.

As it became clear that ChuChu videos were being watched by millions of people on six continents, Krishnan and Chandar started branching out into original songs and nursery rhymes,

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Vinoth Chandar (right) started creating animated videos for his daughter, then decided to share them with the world. He went on to found ChuChu TV with his friend B. M. Krishnan (left) and three others.

which Krishnan has been writing for the past couple of years. Their content runs the gamut, from an adaptation of “Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush,” dedicated to tree planting as a way to fight global warming, to “Banana Song” (“Na na na banana / long and curved banana”).

But their most popular video, by far, is a compilation that opens with “Johnny Johnny Yes Papa,” a take on a nursery rhyme popular in India. With 1.5 billion views, it’s one of the most watched videos of any kind, ever.

In it, a small boy wakes up in the middle of the night and sneaks to the kitchen. He grabs a jar of sugar; just as he’s spooning some into his mouth, the light switches on, and his father walks in.

“Johnny Johnny?” his father says.

“Yes, Papa?”

“Eating sugar?”

“No, Papa.”

“Telling lies?”

“No, Papa.”

“Open your mouth.”

“Ha ha ha!”

As the son laughs, the song kicks up, and all the kids in the family play and dance together.

When Krishnan watches “Johnny Johnny,” he sees a universal father-child interaction. The kid tries to get one over on the dad, and when the dad catches him, the parent isn’t



actually annoyed. Instead, he's almost delighted by the sly willfulness. "Inside, the father will be a little happy," Krishnan said. "This child is having some brains."

To an adult, the appeal of ChuChu videos is not totally obvious. On the one hand, the songs are catchy, the colors are bright, and the characters are cute. On the other, the animation is two-dimensional and kind of choppy, a throwback to the era before Pixar. And there is a lot of movement; sometimes every pixel of the screen seems to be in motion. Krishnan and Chandar believe that any given shot needs to include many different things a child could notice: A bird flying in the background. Something wiggling. These things hold kids' attention.

The men know this with quantitative precision. YouTube analytics show exactly when a video's audience falls off. ChuChu and companies like it—whatever their larger philosophy—can see exactly what holds a toddler's attention, moment by

ChuChu and companies like it can see exactly what holds a toddler's attention, moment by moment, and what causes it to drift.



moment, and what causes it to drift. If a video achieves a 60 percent average completion rate, ChuChu knows it has a hit. Using these data doesn't let it "crack the algorithm"—everyone has access to a version of these numbers; instead, Chandar uses the analytics to tune his and other creators' intuition about what works.

But what people want changes. As YouTube became the world's babysitter—an electronic pacifier during trips, or when adults are having dinner—parents began to seek out videos that soaked up more time. So nowadays what's most popular on Toddler YouTube are not three-minute songs, but compilations that last 30 to 45 minutes, or even longer.

ChuChu learns many lessons from parents, who provide the company with constant feedback. It heard from parents who questioned the diversity of its characters, who were all light-skinned; it now has two light-skinned and two dark-skinned main characters. It heard from parents who wondered about the toy guns in one video; it removed them. It heard from parents about an earlier version of the "Johnny Johnny" video, in which the little boy sleeps in a communal bed with his family, as is common in India; in a new version, he has his own room.

ChuChu is largely making things up as it goes, responding—as any young company would—to what its consumers want. Despite the company's earnest desire to educate the kids who watch its videos, it has not tried to use the lessons generated by previous generations of educational-TV makers. Its executives and developers don't regularly work with academics who could help them shape their content to promote healthy development of young brains. So what effects are ChuChu's shows having on kids? How does what it's producing compare with whatever kids were watching before?

Part of the absurdity of the internet is that these questions get asked only after something metastasizes and spreads across the world. But children's content reflects its time, and this is how we live.

Fifty years ago, the most influential children's-television studio of the 20th century, Children's Television Workshop, came into being, thanks to funding from the Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the United States government. It created an unprecedented thing—*Sesame Street*—with help from a bevy of education experts and Jim Henson, the creator of the Muppets. The cast was integrated. The setting was urban. The show was ultimately broadcast on public television across America, defining a multicultural ideal at a time of racial strife. It was the preschool-media embodiment of the War on Poverty, a national governmental solution to the problems of America's cities.

The 1990s and 2000s saw the growth of cable TV channels targeted at children. With the rise of ubiquitous merchandising deals and niche content, powerful American media companies such as Disney, Turner, and Viacom figured out how to make money off young kids. They created, respectively, Disney Channel, Cartoon Network, and, of course, Nickelodeon, which was the most watched cable channel during traditional television's peak year, 2009–10 (Nielsen's measurement period starts and ends in September). Since then, however, little kids have watched less and less television; as of last spring, ratings in 2018 were down a full 20 percent from just last year. As analysts like to put it, the industry is in free fall. The cause is obvious: More and more kids are watching videos online.

This might not exactly seem like a tragedy. After all, Americans watch a lot of TV. By the time Nielsen began recording how much

time Americans spent in front of TV screens in 1949–50, each household was already averaging four hours and 35 minutes a day. That number kept going up, passing six hours in 1970–71, seven hours in 1983–84, all the way up to eight hours in 2003–04. Viewing finally peaked at eight hours and 55 minutes in 2009–10. Since then, the numbers have been gliding downward, with the most recent data showing Americans' viewing habits edging under eight hours a day for the first time since George W. Bush's presidency.

Given this baseline, perhaps it's fine that phones—and YouTube specifically—are spooning some number of hours from TV. Considered purely as a medium, television seems to have little to recommend it over YouTube. But that would ignore the history of children's television, which is one of those 20th-century triumphs that people take for granted.

The institutions of the 20th century shaped television into a tool for learning. Researchers, regulators, and creators poured tremendous resources into producing a version of children's TV that, at the very least, is not harmful to kids, and that's even been shown to be good for them under the right conditions.

At first, pretty much everybody agrees, television for kids was bad—dumb cartoons, cowboy shows, locally produced slop. There also wasn't much of it, so kids often watched whatever adult programming was on TV. In the early 1950s, one teacher enumerated the changes she'd seen in her pupils since they had “got television”: “They have no sense of values, no feeling of wonder, no sustained interest. Their shallowness of thought and feeling is markedly apparent, and they display a lack of cooperation and inability to finish a task.” There were calls for action.

Congress held hearings on television's possible deleterious effects on children (and adults) in 1952, 1954, and 1955. But not much happened, and the government and TV networks generally settled into a cycle that has been described by the media scholar Keisha Hoerrner. “First,” she has written, “the government castigated the industry for its deplorable programming, then the industry took its verbal punishment and promised to do better, followed by the government staying out of the industry's business.”

Absent substantive oversight by regulators, in the late 1960s, the calls for change entered a new, more creative phase. A group calling itself Action for Children's Television began advocating for specific changes to programming for young kids. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting was formed in 1968 with government dollars. At the same time, Children's Television Workshop began producing *Sesame Street*, and the forerunner to PBS, National Educational Television, began distributing *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. These shows were tremendously successful in creating genuinely educational television. By the time children's programming got swept up into the growing cable industry, the big channels had learned a lot from the public model, which they incorporated into shows such as *Dora the Explorer* and *Blue's Clues*.

Add all these factors up, and a surprising thing is revealed: Through the sustained efforts of children's-TV reformers, something good happened. “Basic scientific research on how children attend to and comprehend television has evolved into sophisticated studies of how children can learn from electronic media,” a literature review by the Kaiser Family Foundation concluded. “This, in turn, has led to the design and production of a number of effective educational television programs, starting with *Sesame Street*, which many experts regard as one of the most important educational innovations of recent decades.”

Among the specific findings, researchers demonstrated that *Sesame Street* improved children's vocabulary, regardless of their parents' education or attitudes. Another study found that regular

adult TV stunted vocabulary development, while high-quality educational programs accelerated language acquisition. The most fascinating study began in the 1980s, when a University of Massachusetts at Amherst team installed video cameras in more than 100 homes, and had those families and hundreds of others keep a written log of their media diet. Following up more than a decade later, researchers found that “viewing educational programs as preschoolers was associated with higher grades, reading more books, placing more value on achievement, greater creativity, and less aggression.” On the flip side, violent programming led to lower grades among girls, in particular. The team was unequivocal about the meaning of these results: What kids watched was much more important than how much of it they watched. Or, as the researchers' refutation of Marshall McLuhan's famous aphorism went, “The medium is not the message: The message is.”

So what message are very young kids receiving from the most popular YouTube videos today? And how are they being shaped by these videos?

To explore this question, I sought out Colleen Russo Johnson, a co-director of UCLA's Center for Scholars & Storytellers. Johnson did her doctoral work on kids' media and serves as a consultant to studios that produce children's programming. I asked her to watch “Johnny Johnny Yes Papa” and a few other ChuChu videos and tell me what she saw.

Her answer was simple: “Bright lights, extraneous elements, and faster pacing.” In one of the videos I had her watch, a little boy dances flanked by two cows on a stage. A crowd waves its hands in the foreground. Lights flash and stars spin in the background. The boy and cows perform “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes,” and as they do, the dance floor lights up, à la *Saturday Night Fever*. Johnson told me all that movement risks distracting kids from any educational work the videos might do.

For kids to have the best chance of learning from a video, Johnson told me, it must unfold slowly, the way a book does when it is read to a child. “Calmer, slower-paced videos with less distracting features are more effective for younger children,” she said. “This also allows the video to focus attention on the relevant visuals for the song, thus aiding in comprehension.”

Some children's videos on YouTube were sadistic or sick. Others seemed like grab bags of keywords: nursery rhymes, surprise eggs, finger family, learning colors.



To be clear, it's hard to make videos that very young children can learn from. (Johnson's doctoral adviser, Georgene Troseth, was part of the team that demonstrated this.) Children under 2 struggle to translate the world of the screen to the one they see around them, with all its complexity and three-dimensionality. That's why things like Baby Einstein have been debunked as educational tools. Most important for kids under 2 is rich interaction with humans and their actual environments. Older toddlers are the ones who can get something truly educational from videos, as opposed to just entertainment and the killing of time.

But even in relatively limited doses, these videos can affect young toddlers' development. If kids watch a lot of fast-paced videos, they come to expect that that is how videos should work, which could make other educational videos less compelling and effective. "If kids get used to all the crazy, distracting, superfluous visual movement, then they may start requiring that to hold their attention," Johnson said.

ChuChu has changed over time—it has slowed the pacing of its videos, focused on the key elements of scenes, and made more explicitly educational videos. But in the wilds of YouTube, the videos with the most views, not the most educational value, are the ones that rise to the top. ChuChu's newer videos, which have more of the features Johnson looks for, have not had the time to Hoover up as much attention, so the old ones keep appearing in YouTube searches and suggestions.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but this is almost precisely the problem that the rest of the media world finds itself in. Because quality is hard to measure, the numbers that exist are the ones that describe attention, not effect: views, watch time, completion rate,

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Fast-paced, bright videos easily grab young children's attention—but those qualities may negate any educational benefits the videos could have.

subscribers. YouTube uses those metrics, ostensibly objectively, when it recommends videos. But as Theodore Porter, the great historian of science and technology, put it in his book *Trust in Numbers*, "Quantification is a way of making decisions without seeming to decide."

In a widely circulated essay last year, the artist James Bridle highlighted the many violent, odd, and nearly robotic children's videos sitting in the vaults of YouTube. They didn't seem made by human hands, he wrote, or at least not completely. Some were sadistic or sick. (After Bridle's essay was published, YouTube undertook an effort to purge the site of "content that attempts to pass as family-friendly, but clearly is not," and ultimately removed some of the disturbing videos the essay cited.) Others seemed like grab bags of keywords that had been successful for more professional operations: *nursery rhymes*, *surprise eggs*, *finger family*, *learning colors*. These were videos reverse engineered from whatever someone might enter into the YouTube search box. And though none of these videos has achieved the scale of ChuChu's work, they definitely get seen, and are occasionally recommended to a child who has been happily watching something more virtuous.

The world of YouTube is vastly different from the world of broadcast television. While broadcasters in the United States and abroad are bound by rules, and the threat of punishment for breaking those rules, far fewer such regulations apply to the creators of YouTube content, or to YouTube itself. YouTube's default position is that no one under 13 is watching videos on its site—because that's the minimum age allowed under its terms of service. In addition to its main site, however, the company has developed an app called YouTube Kids. Like normal YouTube, it plays videos, but the design and content are specifically made for parents and children. It's very good. It draws on the expertise of well-established children's-media companies. Parents can restrict their children's viewing in a multitude of ways, such as allowing access only to content handpicked by PBS Kids. But here's the problem: Just a small fraction of YouTube's 1.9 billion monthly viewers use it. (YouTube Kids is not available in as many countries as normal YouTube is.)

Little kids are responsible for billions of views on YouTube—pretending otherwise is irresponsible. In a small study, a team of pediatricians at Einstein Medical Center, in Philadelphia, found that

YouTube was popular among device-using children under the age of 2. Oh, and 97 percent of the kids in the study had used a mobile device. By age 4, 75 percent of the children in the study had their own tablet, smartphone, or iPod. And that was in 2015. The sea change in children's content that ChuChu and other new video makers have effected is, above all, profitable.

To date, YouTube has hidden behind a terms-of-service defense that its own data must tell it is toothless. There don't seem to be any imminent regulatory solutions to this; by and large, YouTube regulates itself. The company can declare its efforts for children sufficient at any point.

But there is something the company could do immediately to improve the situation. YouTube knows that I—and tens of millions of other people—have watched lots of videos made for toddlers, but it has never once recommended that I switch to YouTube Kids. Think of how hard Facebook works to push users from Instagram onto Facebook and vice versa. Why not try to get more families onto the YouTube Kids app? (Malik Ducard, YouTube's global head of family and learning, said in a statement that YouTube has “worked hard to raise awareness of the YouTube Kids app through heavy promotion. These promos have helped drive our growth. Today, YouTube Kids has over 14 million weekly viewers and over 70 billion views.”)

If streaming video followed the broadcast model, YouTube—in partnership with governments around the world—could also subsidize research into creating educational content specifically for YouTube, and into how best to deliver it to children. The company could invest in research to develop the best quantitative signals for educational programming, so it could recommend that programming to viewers its algorithm believes to be children. It could fund new educational programming, just as broadcasters have been required to do for decades. (“We are always looking for ways to build the educational content offering in the app in a way that's really fun and engaging for kids,” Ducard said.)

Other, more intense measures could help, too. For example, how about restricting toddler videos to the YouTube Kids app? Toddler content could, in effect, be forbidden on the main platform. If video makers wanted their work on the YouTube Kids app, they'd have to agree to have it *only* on the Kids app. This might hurt their view counts initially, but it would keep kids in a safer environment, and in the long term would protect the brand from the inevitable kid-related scandals. The issue of inappropriate videos popping up in YouTube Kids has received a good deal of national press—but society can live with a tiny sliver of bad things slipping through the company's filters. It's a small issue compared with kids watching billions of videos on regular YouTube. Why worry about the ways a kid could hurt himself in a padded room, when huge numbers of kids are tromping around the virtual city's empty lots? (Ducard said that YouTube knows families watch videos together: “That's why this content is available on our main YouTube site and also on our YouTube Kids app.”)

Maybe better or more refined solutions exist, but if the history of children's television teaches us anything, it's that the market alone will not generate the best outcomes for kids. Nor is the United States government likely to demand change, at least not without prompting. Heroes will have to emerge to push for change in the new YouTube'd world, just as they did in the early days of broadcast children's TV. And not all of those heroes will come from the Western world. They'll come from all over the globe, maybe even Chennai.

For any well-meaning kids' producer, one model to look to for inspiration is Fred Rogers—PBS's Mister Rogers. Rogers didn't have any deep academic background in children's development, but early on, he grasped the educational possibilities of the new medium, and in the 15 years between the first children's show he produced and the national premiere of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, he worked constantly to make it better for kids. ChuChu could well be going through a similar stage now. Founded just five years ago, it's encountering a different, and tougher, media landscape than Rogers did—but his path is still worth following.


Watching my daughter play with my phone is a horrifying experience, precisely because her mimicry of adult behaviors is already so accurate. Her tiny fingers poke at buttons, pinch to zoom, endlessly scroll. It's as though she's grown a new brain from her fingertips. Most parents feel some version of this horror. Watching them poke and pinch at our devices, we realize that these rectangles of light and compulsion are not going away, and we are all dosing ourselves with their pleasures and conveniences without knowing the consequences.

It took energy and institutional imagination to fix TV for kids. Where will that come from today? Who will pay for the research and, later, the production? How would or could YouTube implement any kind of blanket recommendation?

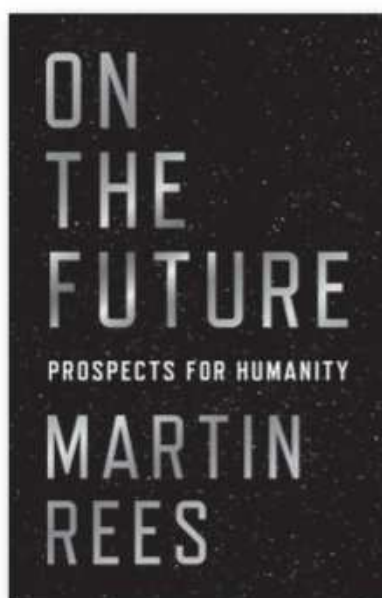
I worry about these questions a lot, and I wonder if our 21st-century American institutions are up to the challenges they've created with their market successes and ethical abdications. Even so, when I visited Chennai, I felt okay about the media future we're heading into. The toddler videos that ChuChu is posting on YouTube are cultural hybrids, exuberant and cosmopolitan, and in a philosophical sense they presuppose a world in which all children are part of one vast community, drawing on the world's collective heritage of storytelling. That's a rich narrative rootstock, with lots of lessons to teach—and right now who's better poised to make the most of it than ChuChu and other companies like it, especially if they can learn from the legacy of American educational TV?

ChuChu's founders aren't blind to the power of new-media platforms, or the undertow of crappy YouTube producers, or the addictive power of devices, but the magnitude and improbability of their success more than balances the scales. They don't quite seem to know why (or how, exactly) they've been given this opportunity to speak to millions from an office in South India, but they're not going to throw away the chance. After all, there are so many stories to tell.

On my last day in the ChuChu offices, Krishnan related a parable to me from the Mahābhārata, a Sanskrit epic. A prince wants to be known as generous, so the god Krishna decides to put him to the test: He creates two mountains of gold and tells the prince to give it all away in 24 hours. The prince begins to do so, parceling it out to people he thinks need it. But as the day ends he's hardly made a dent in the mountains. So Krishna calls another prince and tells him he has just five minutes to give away the gold. This prince sees two people walking along, goes right over to them, and gives each a mountain. Just like that, the job is done. The moral is unsettling, but simple: Don't impose limits on your generosity.

Krishnan loves this parable. “This is a story which I can do for ChuChu,” he told me. “But with pizza.” 

Alexis C. Madrigal is a staff writer at The Atlantic.



"A book to be read by anyone on Earth who cares about its future."

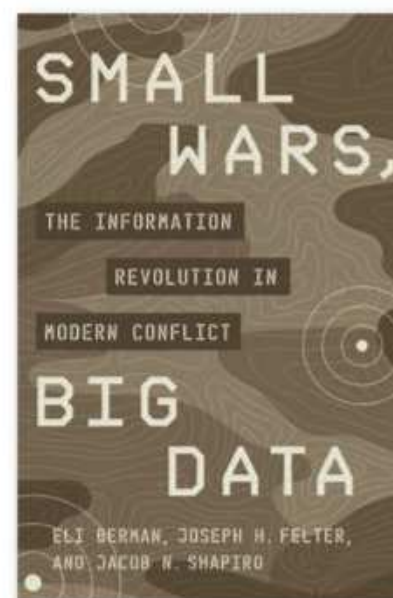
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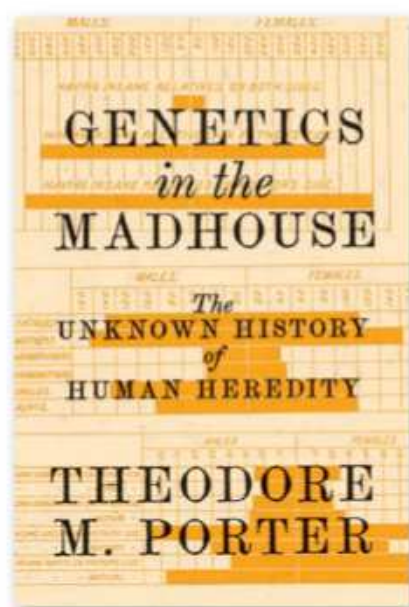
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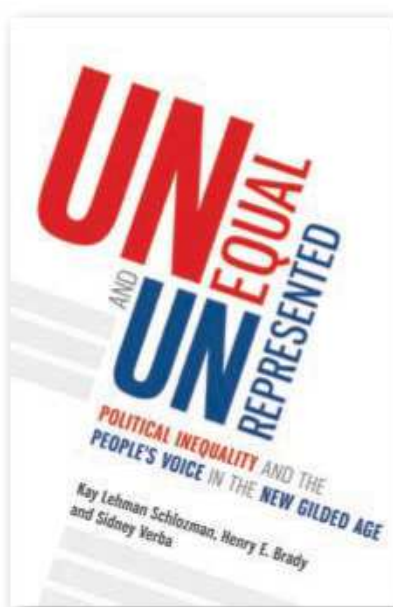
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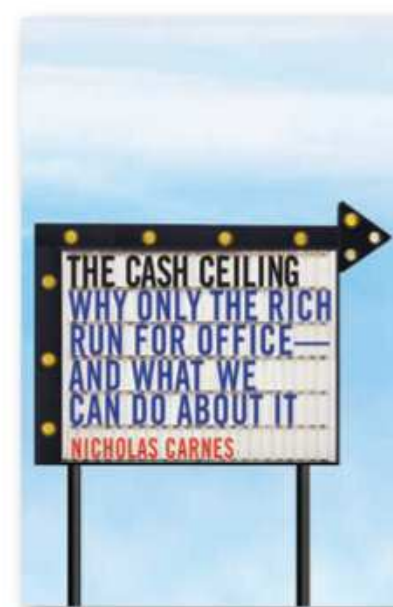
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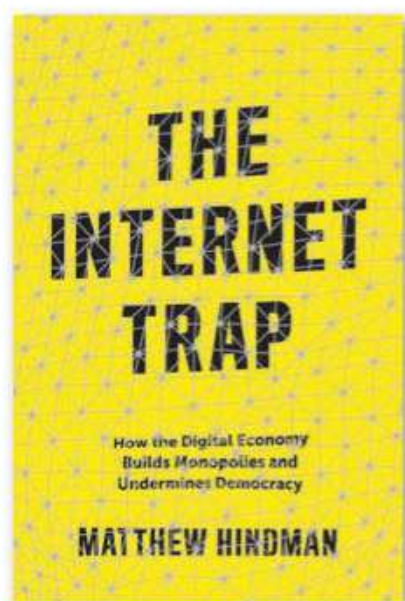
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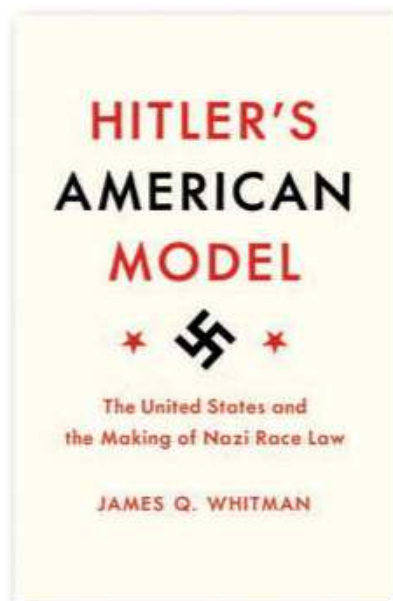
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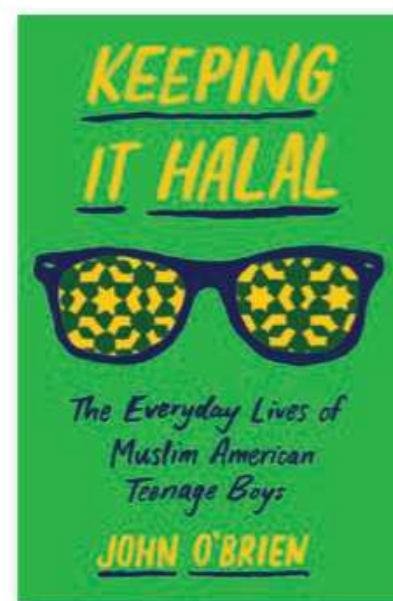
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THE PENTAGON
WANTS TO
WEAPONIZE THE BRAIN.
WHAT COULD
GO WRONG?

BY MICHAEL JOSEPH GROSS

ILLUSTRATIONS BY EDDIE GUY



+

The Pentagon's R&D arm, DARPA, gave us drones and the internet. Now the agency has a new mission: to fold computers into the brain and nervous system—or maybe vice versa. Silicon Valley is eating all of this up.

I. WHO COULD OBJECT?

“Tonight I would like to share with you an idea that I am extremely passionate about,” the young man said. His long black hair was swept back like a rock star’s, or a gangster’s. “Think about this,” he continued. “Throughout all human history, the way that we have expressed our intent, the way we have expressed our goals, the way we have expressed our desires, has been limited by our bodies.” When he inhaled, his rib cage expanded and filled out the fabric of his shirt. Gesturing toward his body, he said, “We are born into this world with *this*. Whatever nature or luck has given us.”

His speech then took a turn: “Now, we’ve had a lot of interesting tools over the years, but fundamentally the way that we work with those tools is through our bodies.” Then a further turn: “Here’s a situation that I know all of you know very well—your frustration with your smartphones, right? This is another tool, right? And we are still communicating with these tools through our bodies.”

And then it made a leap: “I would claim to you that these tools are not so smart. And maybe one of the reasons why they’re not so smart is because they’re not connected to our brains. Maybe if we could hook those devices into our brains, they could have some idea of what our goals are, what our intent is, and what our frustration is.”

So began “Beyond Bionics,” a talk by Justin C. Sanchez, then an associate professor of biomedical engineering and neuroscience at the University of Miami, and a faculty member of the Miami Project to Cure Paralysis. He was speaking at a TEDx conference in Florida in 2012. What lies beyond bionics? Sanchez described his work as trying to “understand the neural code,” which would involve putting “very fine microwire electrodes”—the diameter of a human hair—“into the brain.” When we do that, he said, we would be able to “listen in to the music of the brain” and “listen in to what somebody’s motor intent might be” and get a glimpse of “your goals and your rewards” and then “start to understand how the brain encodes behavior.”

He explained, “With all of this knowledge, what we’re trying to do is build new medical devices, new implantable chips for the body that can be encoded or programmed with all of these different aspects. Now, you may be wondering, what are we going to do with those chips? Well, the first recipients of these kinds of technologies will be the paralyzed. It would make me so happy by the end of my career if I could help get somebody out of their wheelchair.”

Sanchez went on, “The people that we are trying to help should *never* be imprisoned by their bodies. And today we can design technologies that can help liberate them from that. I’m *truly* inspired by that. It drives me every day when I wake up and get out of bed. Thank you so much.” He blew a kiss to the audience.

A year later, Justin Sanchez went to work for the Defense Advanced Research

Projects Agency, the Pentagon’s R&D department. At DARPA, he now oversees all research on the healing and enhancement of the human mind and body. And his ambition involves more than helping get disabled people out of their wheelchair—much more.

DARPA has dreamed for decades of merging human beings and machines. Some years ago, when the prospect of mind-controlled weapons became a public-relations liability for the agency, officials resorted to characteristic ingenuity. They recast the stated purpose of their neurotechnology research to focus ostensibly on the narrow goal of healing injury and curing illness. The work wasn’t about weaponry or warfare, agency officials claimed. It was about therapy and health care. Who could object? But even if this claim were true, such changes would have extensive ethical, social, and metaphysical implications. Within decades, neurotechnology could cause social disruption on a scale that would make smartphones and the internet look like gentle ripples on the pond of history.

Most unsettling, neurotechnology confounds age-old answers to this question: What is a human being?

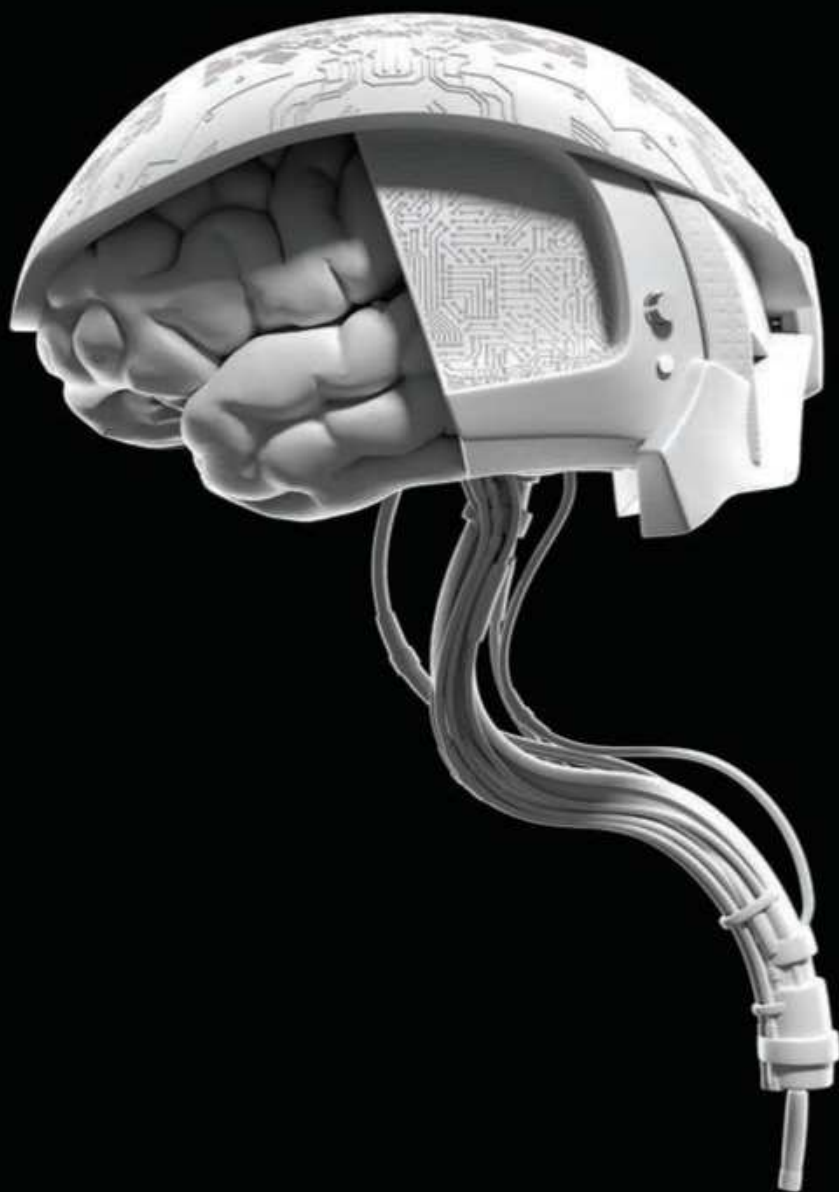
II. HIGH RISK, HIGH REWARD

In his 1958 State of the Union address, President Dwight Eisenhower declared that the United States of America “must be forward-looking in our research and development to anticipate the unimagined weapons of the future.” A few weeks later, his administration created the Advanced Research Projects Agency, a bureaucratically independent body that reported to the secretary of defense. This move had been prompted by the Soviet launch of the *Sputnik* satellite. The agency’s original remit was to hasten America’s entry into space.

During the next few years, ARPA’s mission grew to encompass research into “man-computer symbiosis” and a classified program of experiments in mind control that was code-named Project Pandora. There were bizarre efforts that involved trying to move objects at a distance by means of thought alone. In 1972, with an increment of candor, the word *Defense* was added to the name, and the agency became DARPA. Pursuing its mission, DARPA funded researchers who helped invent technologies that changed the nature of battle (stealth aircraft, drones) and shaped daily life for billions (voice-recognition technology, GPS devices). Its best-known creation is the internet.

The agency’s penchant for what it calls “high-risk, high-reward” research ensured that it would also fund a cavalcade of folly. Project Seesaw, a quintessential Cold War boondoggle, envisioned a “particle-beam weapon” that could be deployed in the event of a Soviet attack. The idea was to set off a series of nuclear explosions beneath the Great Lakes, creating a giant underground chamber. Then the lakes would be drained, in a period of 15 minutes, to generate the electricity needed to set off a particle beam. The

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beam would accelerate through tunnels hundreds of miles long (also carved out by underground nuclear explosions) in order to muster enough force to shoot up into the atmosphere and knock incoming Soviet missiles out of the sky. During the Vietnam War, DARPA tried to build a Cybernetic Anthropomorphous Machine, a jungle vehicle that officials called a “mechanical elephant.”

The diverse and sometimes even opposing goals of DARPA scientists and their Defense Department overlords merged into a murky, symbiotic research culture—“unencumbered by the typical bureaucratic oversight and uninhibited by the restraints of scientific peer review,” Sharon Weinberger wrote in a recent book, *The Imagineers of War*. In Weinberger’s account, DARPA’s institutional history involves many episodes of introducing a new technology in the context of one appealing application, while

hiding other genuine but more troubling motives. At DARPA, the left hand knows, and doesn’t know, what the right hand is doing.

The agency is deceptively compact. A mere 220 employees, supported by about 1,000 contractors, report for work each day at DARPA’s headquarters, a nondescript glass-and-steel building in Arlington, Virginia, across the street from the practice rink for the Washington Capitals. About 100 of these employees are program managers—scientists and engineers, part of whose job is to oversee about 2,000 outsourcing arrangements with corporations, universities, and government labs. The effective workforce of DARPA actually runs into the range of tens of thousands. The budget is officially said to be about \$3 billion, and has stood at roughly that level for an implausibly long time—the past 14 years.

The Biological Technologies Office, created in 2014, is the newest of DARPA’s six main divisions. This is the office headed by Justin Sanchez. One purpose of the office is to “restore and maintain war-fighter abilities” by various means, including many that emphasize neurotechnology—applying engineering principles to the biology of the nervous system. For instance, the Restoring Active Memory program develops neuroprosthetics—tiny electronic components implanted in brain tissue—that aim to alter memory formation so as

to counteract traumatic brain injury. Does DARPA also run secret biological programs? In the past, the Department of Defense has done such things. It has conducted tests on human subjects that were questionable, unethical, or, many have argued, illegal. The Big Boy protocol, for example, compared radiation exposure of sailors who worked above and below deck on a battleship, never informing the sailors that they were part of an experiment.

Last year I asked Sanchez directly whether any of DARPA’s neurotechnology work, specifically, was classified. He broke eye contact and said, “I can’t—We’ll have to get off that topic, because I can’t answer one way or another.” When I framed the question personally—“Are *you* involved with any classified neuroscience project?”—he looked me in the eye and said, “I’m not doing any classified work on the neurotechnology end.”

If his speech is careful, it is not spare. Sanchez has appeared at public events with some frequency (videos are posted on DARPA's YouTube channel), to articulate joyful streams of good news about DARPA's proven applications—for instance, brain-controlled prosthetic arms for soldiers who have lost limbs. Occasionally he also mentions some of his more distant aspirations. One of them is the ability, via computer, to transfer knowledge and thoughts from one person's mind to another's.

III. "WE TRY TO FIND WAYS TO SAY YES"

Medicine and biology were of minor interest to DARPA until the 1990s, when biological weapons became a threat to U.S. national security. The agency made a significant investment in biology in 1997, when DARPA created the Controlled Biological Systems program. The zoologist Alan S. Rudolph managed this sprawling effort to integrate the built world with the natural world. As he explained it to me, the aim was "to increase, if you will, the baud rate, or the cross-communication, between living and nonliving systems." He spent his days working through questions such as "Could we unlock the signals in the brain associated with movement in order to allow you to control something outside your body, like a prosthetic leg or an arm, a robot, a smart home—or to send the signal to somebody else and have them receive it?"

Human enhancement became an agency priority. "Soldiers having no physical, physiological, or cognitive limitation will be key to survival and operational dominance in the future," predicted Michael Goldblatt, who had been the science and technology officer at McDonald's before joining DARPA in 1999. To enlarge humanity's capacity to "control evolution," he assembled a portfolio of programs with names that sounded like they'd been taken from video games or sci-fi movies: Metabolic Dominance, Persistence in Combat, Continuous Assisted Performance, Augmented Cognition, Peak Soldier Performance, Brain-Machine Interface.

The programs of this era, as described by Annie Jacobsen in her 2015 book, *The Pentagon's Brain*, often shaded into mad-scientist territory. The Continuous Assisted Performance project attempted to create a "24/7 soldier" who could go without sleep for up to a week. ("My measure of success," one DARPA official said of these programs, "is that the International Olympic Committee bans everything we do.")

Dick Cheney relished this kind of research. In the summer of 2001, an array of "super-soldier" programs was presented to the vice president. His enthusiasm contributed to the latitude that President George W. Bush's administration gave DARPA—at a time when the agency's foundation was shifting. Academic science gave way to tech-industry "innovation." Tony Tether, who had spent his career working alternately for Big Tech, defense

contractors, and the Pentagon, became DARPA's director. After the 9/11 attacks, the agency announced plans for a surveillance program called Total Information Awareness, whose logo included an all-seeing eye emitting rays of light that scanned the globe. The pushback was intense, and Congress took DARPA to task for Orwellian overreach. The head of the program—Admiral John Poindexter, who had been tainted by scandal back in the Reagan years—later resigned, in 2003. The controversy also drew unwanted attention to DARPA's research on super-soldiers and the melding of mind and machine. That research made people nervous, and Alan Rudolph, too, found himself on the way out.

In this time of crisis, DARPA invited Geoff Ling, a neurology-ICU physician and, at the time, an active-duty Army officer, to join the Defense Sciences Office. (Ling went on to work in the Biological Technologies Office when it spun out from Defense Sciences, in 2014.) When Ling was interviewed for his first job at DARPA, in 2002, he was preparing for deployment to Afghanistan and thinking about very specific combat needs. One was a "pharmacy on demand" that would eliminate the bulk of powdery fillers from drugs in pill or capsule form and instead would formulate active ingredients for ingestion via a lighter, more compact, dissolving substance—like Listerine breath strips. This eventually became a DARPA program. The agency's brazen sense of possibility buoyed Ling, who recalls with pleasure how colleagues told him, "We try to find ways to say yes, not ways to say no." With Rudolph gone, Ling picked up the torch.

Ling talks fast. He has a tough-guy voice. The faster he talks, the tougher he sounds, and when I met him, his voice hit top speed as he described a first principle of Defense Sciences. He said he had learned this "particularly" from Alan Rudolph: "Your brain tells your hands what to do. Your hands basically are its tools, okay? And that was a revelation to me." He continued, "We are tool users—that's what humans are. A human wants to fly, he builds an airplane and flies. A human wants to have recorded history, and he creates a pen. Everything we do is because we use tools, right? And the ultimate tools are our hands and feet. Our hands allow us to work with the environment to do stuff, and our feet take us where our brain wants to go. The brain is the most important thing."

Ling connected this idea of the brain's primacy with his own clinical experience of the battlefield. He asked himself, "How can I liberate mankind from the limitations of the body?" The program for which Ling became best known is called Revolutionizing Prosthetics. Since the Civil War, as Ling has said, the prosthetic arm given to most amputees has been barely more sophisticated than "a hook," and not without risks: "Try taking care of your morning ablutions with that bad boy, and you're going to need a proctologist every goddamn day." With help from DARPA colleagues and

ONE ASPIRATION:

THE ABILITY,

VIA COMPUTER,

TO TRANSFER

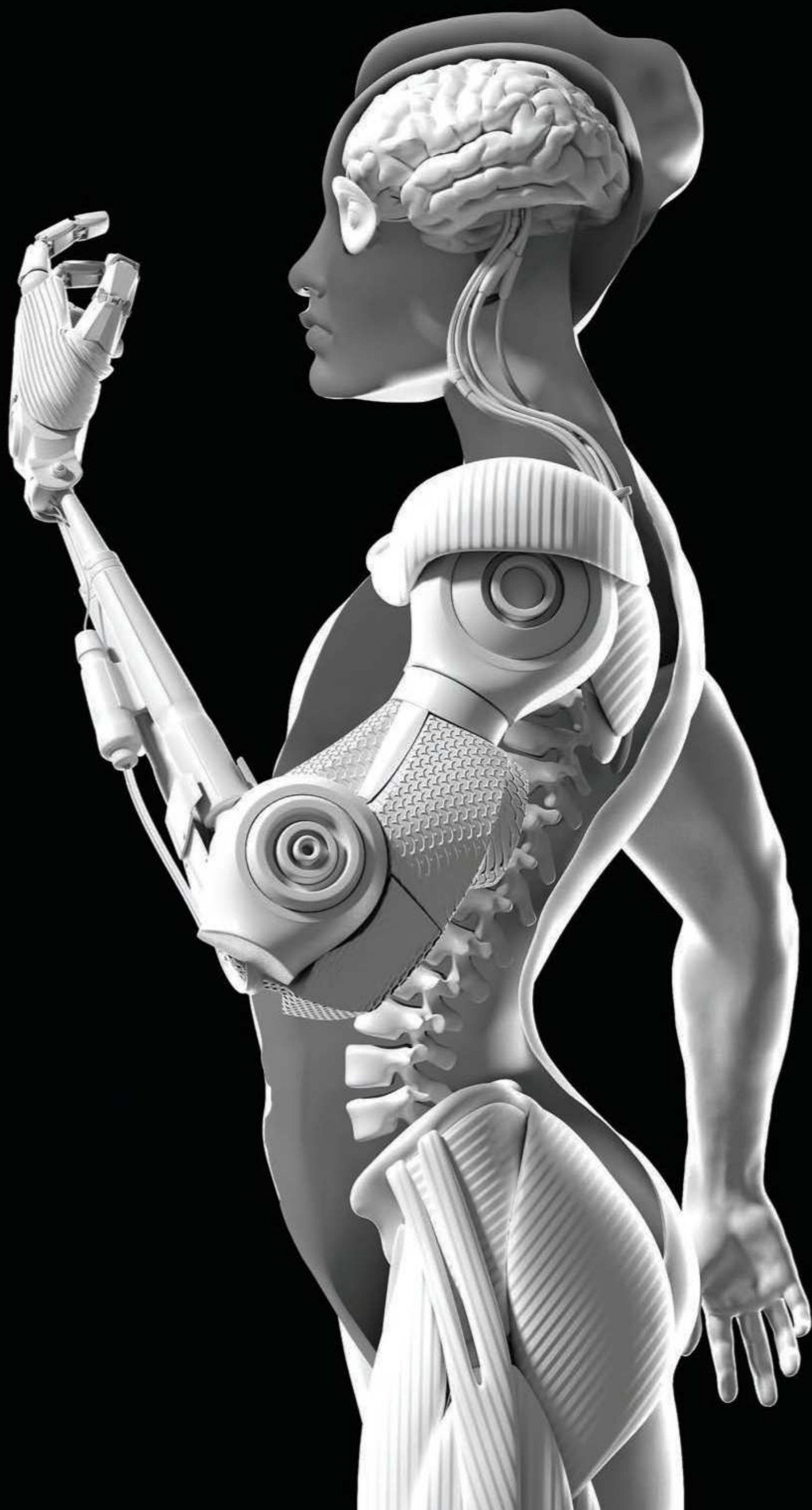
KNOWLEDGE AND

THOUGHTS FROM

ONE PERSON'S

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academic and corporate researchers, Ling and his team built something that was once all but unimaginable: a brain-controlled prosthetic arm.

No invention since the internet has been such a reliable source of good publicity for DARPA. Milestones in its development were hailed with wonder. In 2012, *60 Minutes* showed a paralyzed woman named Jan Scheuermann feeding herself a bar of chocolate using a robotic arm that she manipulated by means of a brain implant.

Yet DARPA's work to repair damaged bodies was merely a marker on a road to somewhere else. The agency has always had a larger mission, and in a 2015 presentation, one program manager—a Silicon Valley recruit—described that mission: to “free the mind from the limitations of even *healthy* bodies.” What the agency learns from healing makes way for enhancement. The mission is to make human beings something other than what we are, with powers beyond the ones we're born with and beyond the ones we can organically attain.

The internal workings of DARPA are complicated. The goals and values of its research shift and evolve in the manner of a strange, half-conscious shell game. The line between healing and enhancement blurs. And no one should lose sight of the fact that *D* is the first letter in DARPA's name. A year and a half after the video of Jan Scheuermann feeding herself chocolate was shown on television, DARPA made another video of her, in which her brain-computer interface was connected to an F-35 flight simulator, and she was flying the airplane. DARPA later disclosed this at a conference called Future of War.

Geoff Ling's efforts have been carried on by Justin Sanchez. In 2016, Sanchez appeared at DARPA's “Demo Day” with a man

named Johnny Matheny, whom agency officials describe as the first “osseointegrated” upper-limb amputee—the first man with a prosthetic arm attached directly to bone. Matheny demonstrated what was, at the time, DARPA's most advanced prosthetic arm. He told the attendees, “I can sit here and curl a 45-pound dumbbell all day long, till the battery runs dead.” The next day, Gizmodo ran this headline above its report from the event: “DARPA's Mind-Controlled Arm Will Make You Wish You Were a Cyborg.”

Since then, DARPA's work in neurotechnology has avowedly widened in scope, to embrace “the broader aspects of life,” Sanchez told me, “beyond the person in the hospital who is using it to heal.” The logical progression of all this research is the creation of human beings who are ever more perfect, by certain technological standards. New and improved soldiers are necessary and desirable for DARPA, but they are just the window-display version of the life that lies ahead.

IV. “OVER THE HORIZON”

Consider memory, Sanchez told me: “Everybody thinks about what it would be like to give memory a boost by 20, 30, 40 percent—pick your favorite number—and how that would be transformative.” He spoke of memory enhancement through neural interface as an alternative form of education. “School in its most fundamental form is a technology that we have developed as a society to help our brains to do more,” he said. “In a different way, neurotechnology uses other tools and techniques to help our brains be the best that they can be.” One technique was described in a 2013 paper, a study involving researchers at Wake Forest University, the University of Southern California, and the University of Kentucky. Researchers performed surgery

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on 11 rats. Into each rat's brain, an electronic array—featuring 16 stainless-steel wires—was implanted. After the rats recovered from surgery, they were separated into two groups, and they spent a period of weeks getting educated, though one group was educated more than the other.

The less educated group learned a simple task, involving how to procure a droplet of water. The more educated group learned a complex version of that same task—to procure the water, these rats had to persistently poke levers with their nose despite confounding delays in the delivery of the water droplet. When the more educated group of rats attained mastery of this task, the researchers exported the neural-firing patterns recorded in the rats' brains—the memory of how to perform the complex task—to a computer.

“What we did then was we took those signals and we gave it to an animal that was stupid,” Geoff Ling said at a DARPA event in 2015—meaning that researchers took the neural-firing patterns encoding the memory of how to perform the more complex task, recorded from the brains of the more educated rats, and transferred those patterns into the brains of the less educated rats—“and that stupid animal got it. They were able to execute that full thing.” Ling summarized: “For this rat, we reduced the learning period from eight weeks down to seconds.”

“They could inject memory using the precise neural codes for certain skills,” Sanchez told me. He believes that the Wake Forest experiment amounts to a foundational step toward “memory prosthesis.” This is the stuff of *The Matrix*. Though many researchers question the findings—cautioning that, really, it can't be this simple—Sanchez is confident: “If I know the neural codes in one individual, could I give that neural code to another person? I think

you could.” Under Sanchez, DARPA has funded human experiments at Wake Forest, the University of Southern California, and the University of Pennsylvania, using similar mechanisms in analogous parts of the brain. These experiments did not transfer memory from one person to another, but instead gave individuals a memory “boost.” Implanted electrodes recorded neuronal activity associated with recognizing patterns (at Wake Forest and USC) and memorizing word lists (at Penn) in certain brain circuits. Then electrodes fed back those recordings of neuronal activity into the same circuits as a form of reinforcement. The result, in both cases, was significantly improved memory recall.

Doug Weber, a neural engineer at the University of Pittsburgh who recently finished a four-year term as a DARPA program manager, working with Sanchez, is a memory-transfer skeptic. Born in Wisconsin, he has the demeanor of a sitcom dad: not too polished, not too rumbled. “I don't believe in the infinite limits of technology evolution,” he told me. “I do believe there are going to be some technical challenges which are impossible to achieve.” For instance, when scientists put electrodes in the brain, those devices eventually fail—after a few months or a few years. The most intractable problem is blood leakage. When foreign material is put into the brain, Weber said, “you undergo this process of wounding, bleeding, healing, wounding, bleeding, healing, and whenever blood leaks into the brain compartment, the activity in the cells goes way down, so they become sick, essentially.” More effectively than any fortress, the brain rejects invasion.

Even if the interface problems that limit us now didn't exist, Weber went on to say, he still would not believe that neuroscientists could enable the memory-prosthesis scenario. Some people like to think about the brain as if it were a computer,

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Weber explained, “where information goes from A to B to C, like everything is very modular. And certainly there is clear modular organization in the brain. But it’s not nearly as sharp as it is in a computer. All information is everywhere all the time, right? It’s so widely distributed that achieving that level of integration with the brain is far out of reach right now.”

Peripheral nerves, by contrast, conduct signals in a more modular fashion. The biggest, longest peripheral nerve is the vagus. It connects the brain with the heart, the lungs, the digestive tract, and more. Neuroscientists understand the brain’s relationship with the vagus nerve more clearly than they understand the intricacies of memory formation and recall among neurons within the brain. Weber believes that it may be possible to stimulate the vagus nerve in ways that enhance the process of learning—not by transferring experiential memories, but by sharpening the facility for certain skills.

To test this hypothesis, Weber directed the creation of a new program in the Biological Technologies Office, called Targeted Neuroplasticity Training (TNT). Teams of researchers at seven universities are investigating whether vagal-nerve stimulation can enhance learning in three areas: marksmanship, surveillance and reconnaissance, and language. The team at Arizona State has an ethicist on staff whose job, according to Weber, “is to be looking over the horizon to anticipate potential challenges and conflicts that may arise” regarding the ethical dimensions of the program’s technology, “before we let the genie out of the bottle.” At a TNT kickoff meeting, the research teams spent 90 minutes discussing the ethical questions involved in their work—the start of a fraught conversation that will broaden to include many others, and last for a very long time.

DARPA officials refer to the potential consequences of neurotechnology by invoking the acronym *ELSI*, a term of art devised for the Human Genome Project. It stands for “ethical, legal, social implications.” The man who led the discussion on ethics among the research teams was Steven Hyman, a neuroscientist

and neuroethicist at MIT and Harvard’s Broad Institute. Hyman is also a former head of the National Institute of Mental Health. When I spoke with him about his work on DARPA programs, he noted that one issue needing attention is “cross talk.” A man-machine interface that does not just “read” someone’s brain but also “writes into” someone’s brain would almost certainly create “cross talk between those circuits which we are targeting and the circuits which are engaged in what we might call social and moral emotions,” he said. It is impossible to predict the effects of such cross talk on “the conduct of war” (the example he gave), much less, of course, on ordinary life.



Weber and a DARPA spokesperson related some of the questions the researchers asked in their ethics discussion: Who will decide how this technology gets used? Would a superior be able to force subordinates to use it? Will genetic tests be able to determine how responsive someone would be to targeted neuroplasticity training? Would such tests be voluntary or mandatory? Could the results of such tests lead to discrimination in school admissions or employment? What if the technology affects moral or emotional cognition—our ability to tell right from wrong or to control our own behavior?

Recalling the ethics discussion, Weber told me, “The main thing I remember is that we ran out of time.”

V. “YOU CAN WEAPONIZE ANYTHING”

In *The Pentagon’s Brain*, Annie Jacobsen suggested that DARPA’s neurotechnology research, including upper-limb prosthetics and the brain-machine interface, is not what it seems: “It is likely that DARPA’s primary goal in advancing prosthetics is to give robots, not men, better arms and hands.” Geoff Ling rejected the gist of her conclusion when I summarized it for him (he hadn’t read the book). He told me, “When we talk about stuff like this, and people are looking for nefarious things, I always say to them, ‘Do you honestly believe that the military that your grandfather served in, your uncle served in, has changed into being Nazis or the Russian army?’ Everything we did in the Revolutionizing Prosthetics program—everything we did—is published. If we were really building an autonomous-weapons system, why would we publish it in the open literature for our adversaries to read? We hid nothing. We hid not a thing. And you know what? That meant that we didn’t just do it for America. We did it for the world.”

I started to say that publishing this research would not prevent its being misused. But the terms *use* and *misuse* overlook a bigger issue at the core of any meaningful neurotechnology-ethics discussion. Will an enhanced human being—a human being possessing a neural interface with a computer—still be human, as people have experienced humanity through all of time? Or will such a person be a different sort of creature?

The U.S. government has put limits on DARPA’s power to experiment with enhancing human capabilities. Ling says colleagues told him of a “directive”: “Congress was very specific,” he said. “They don’t want us to build a superperson.” *This can’t be the announced goal*, Congress seems to be saying, *but if we get there by accident—well, that’s another story*. Ling’s imagination remains at large. He told me, “If I gave you a third eye, and the eye can see in the ultraviolet, that would be incorporated into everything that you do. If I gave you a third ear that could hear at a very high frequency, like a bat or like a snake, then you would incorporate all those senses into your experience and you would use that to your advantage. If you can see at night, you’re better than the person who can’t see at night.”

Enhancing the senses to gain superior advantage—this language suggests weaponry. Such capacities could certainly have military applications, Ling acknowledged—“You can weaponize anything, right?”—before he dismissed the idea and returned to the party line: “No, actually, this has to do with increasing a human’s capability” in a way that he compared to military training and civilian education, and justified in economic terms.

“Let’s say I gave you a third arm,” and then a fourth arm—so, two additional hands, he said. “You would be more capable; you would do more things, right?” And if you could control

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four hands as seamlessly as you're controlling your current two hands, he continued, "you would actually be doing double the amount of work that you would normally do. It's as simple as that. You're increasing your productivity to do whatever you want to do." I started to picture his vision—working with four arms, four hands—and asked, "Where does it end?"

"It won't ever end," Ling said. "I mean, it will constantly get better and better—" His cellphone rang. He took the call, then resumed where he had left off: "What DARPA does is we provide a fundamental tool so that other people can take those tools and do great things with them that we're not even thinking about."

Judging by what he said next, however, the number of things that DARPA is thinking about far exceeds what it typically talks about in public. "If a brain can control a robot that looks like a hand," Ling said, "why can't it control a robot that looks like a snake? Why can't that brain control a robot that looks like a big mass of Jell-O, able to get around corners and up and down and through things? I mean, somebody will find an application for that. They couldn't do it now, because they can't become that glob, right? But in *my* world, with their brain now having a direct interface with that glob, that glob is the embodiment of *them*. So now they're basically the glob, and they can go do everything a glob can do."

VI. GOLD RUSH

DARPA's developing capabilities still hover at or near a proof-of-concept stage. But that's close enough to have drawn investment from some of the world's richest corporations. In 1990, during the administration of President George H. W. Bush, DARPA Director Craig I. Fields lost his job because, according to contemporary news accounts, he intentionally fostered business development with some Silicon Valley companies, and White House officials deemed that inappropriate. Since the administration of the second President Bush, however, such sensitivities have faded.

Over time, DARPA has become something of a farm team for Silicon Valley. Regina Dugan, who was appointed DARPA director by President Barack Obama, went on to head Google's Advanced Technology and Projects group, and other former DARPA officials went to work for her there. She then led R&D for the analogous group at Facebook, called Building 8. (She has since left Facebook.)


DARPA's neurotechnology research has been affected in recent years by corporate poaching. Doug Weber told me that some DARPA researchers have been "scooped up" by companies including Verily, the life-sciences division of Alphabet (the parent company of Google), which, in partnership with the British pharmaceutical conglomerate GlaxoSmithKline, created a company called Galvani Bioelectronics, to bring neuro-modulation

devices to market. Galvani calls its business "bioelectric medicine," which conveys an aura of warmth and trustworthiness. Ted Berger, a University of Southern California biomedical engineer who collaborated with the Wake Forest researchers on their studies of memory transfer in rats, worked as the chief science officer at the neurotechnology company Kernel, which plans to build "advanced neural interfaces to treat disease and dysfunction, illuminate the mechanisms of intelligence, and extend cognition." Elon Musk has courted DARPA researchers to join his company Neuralink, which is said to be developing an

interface known as "neural lace." Facebook's Building 8 is working on a neural interface too. In 2017, Regina Dugan said that 60 engineers were at work on a system with the goal of allowing users to type 100 words a minute "directly from your brain." Geoff Ling is on Building 8's advisory board.

Talking with Justin Sanchez, I speculated that if he realizes his ambitions, he could change daily life in even more fundamental and lasting ways than Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg and Twitter's Jack Dorsey have. Sanchez blushes easily, and he breaks eye contact when he is uncomfortable, but he did not look away when he heard his name mentioned in such company. Remembering a remark that he had once made about his hope for neurotechnology's wide adoption, but with "appropriate checks to make sure that it's done in the right way," I asked him to talk about what the right way might look like. Did any member of Congress strike him as having good ideas about legal or regulatory structures that might shape an emerging neural-interface industry? He demurred ("DARPA's mission isn't to define or even direct those things") and suggested that, in reality, market forces would do more to shape the evolution of neurotechnology than laws or regulations or deliberate policy choices. What will happen, he said, is that scientists at universities will sell their discoveries or create start-ups. The marketplace will take it from there: "As they develop their companies, and as they develop their products, they're going to be subject to convincing people that whatever they're developing makes

sense, that it helps people to be a better version of themselves. And that process—that day-to-day development—will ultimately guide where these technologies go. I mean, I think that's the frank reality of how it ultimately will unfold."

He seemed entirely untroubled by what may be the most troubling aspect of DARPA's work: not that it discovers what it discovers, but that the world has, so far, always been ready to buy it. 

Michael Joseph Gross, a contributing editor at Vanity Fair, is writing a book about strength, to be published by Dutton.

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ENHANCED HUMAN
BEING—A
HUMAN BEING
POSSESSING A
NEURAL INTERFACE
WITH A
COMPUTER—STILL
BE A
HUMAN BEING?

An **URGENT DEFENSE** of **AMERICAN** **DEMOCRACY**



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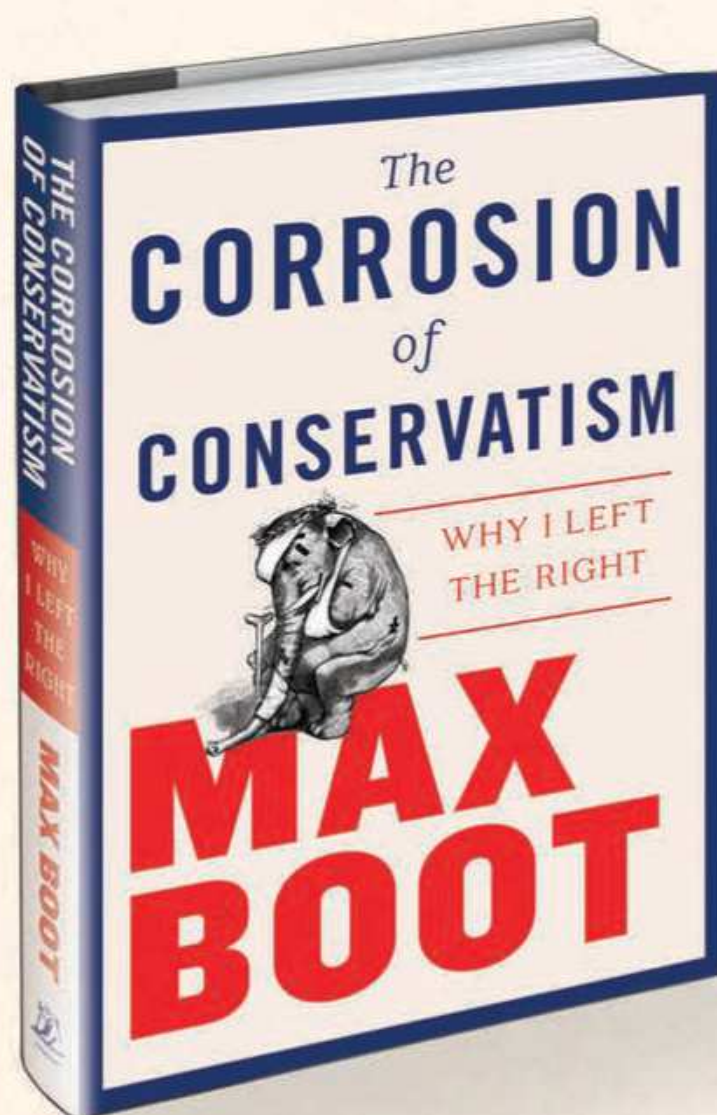
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"Alexa,"



HOW WILL YOU CHANGE US?”

**THE VOICE REVOLUTION HAS
ONLY JUST BEGUN.**
TODAY, ALEXA IS A HUMBLE SERVANT.
**VERY SOON, SHE WILL
BE MUCH MORE—**
A TEACHER, A THERAPIST,
A CONFIDANT, AN INFORMANT.

BY **JUDITH SHULEVITZ**

FOR A FEW DAYS this summer, Alexa, the voice assistant who speaks to me through my Amazon Echo Dot, took to ending our interactions with a whisper: *Sweet dreams*. Every time it happened, I was startled, although I thought I understood why she was doing it, insofar as I understand anything that goes on inside that squat slice of black tube. I had gone onto Amazon.com and activated a third-party “skill”—an applike program that enables Alexa to perform a service or do a trick—called “Baby Lullaby.” It plays an instrumental version of a nursery song (yes, I still listen to lullabies to get to sleep), then signs off softly with the nighttime benediction. My conjecture is that the last string of code somehow went astray and attached itself to other “skills.” But even though my adult self knew perfectly well that *Sweet dreams* was a glitch, a part of me wanted to believe that Alexa meant it. Who doesn’t crave a motherly goodnight, even in mid-afternoon? Proust would have understood.

We’re all falling for Alexa, unless we’re falling for Google Assistant, or Siri, or some other genie in a smart speaker. When I say “smart,” I mean the speakers possess artificial intelligence, can conduct basic conversations, and are hooked up to the internet, which allows them to look stuff up and do things for you. And when I say “all,” I know some readers will think, *Speak for yourself!* Friends my age—we’re the last of the Baby Boomers—tell me they have no desire to talk to a computer or have a computer talk to them. Cynics of every age suspect their virtual assistants of eavesdropping, and not without reason. Smart speakers are yet another way for companies to keep tabs on our searches and purchases. Their microphones listen even when you’re not interacting with them, because they have to be able to hear their “wake word,” the command that snaps them to attention and puts them at your service.

The speakers’ manufacturers promise that only speech that follows the wake word is archived in the cloud, and Amazon and Google, at least, make deleting those exchanges easy enough. Nonetheless, every so often weird glitches occur, like the time Alexa recorded a family’s private conversation without their having said the wake word and emailed the recording to an acquaintance on their contacts list. Amazon explained that Alexa must have been awakened by a

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word that sounded like *Alexa* (Texas? A Lexus? Praxis?), then misconstrued elements of the ensuing conversation as a series of commands. The explanation did not make me feel much better.

Privacy concerns have not stopped the march of these devices into our homes, however. Amazon doesn’t disclose exact figures, but when I asked how many Echo devices have been sold, a spokeswoman said “tens of millions.” By the end of last year, more than 40 million smart speakers had been installed worldwide, according to Canalys, a technology-research firm. Based on current sales, Canalys estimates that this figure will reach 100 million by the end of this year. According to a 2018 report by National Public Radio and Edison Research, 8 million Americans own three or more smart speakers, suggesting that they feel the need to always have one within earshot. By 2021, according to another research firm, Ovum, there will be almost as many voice-activated assistants on the planet as people. It took about 30 years for mobile phones to outnumber

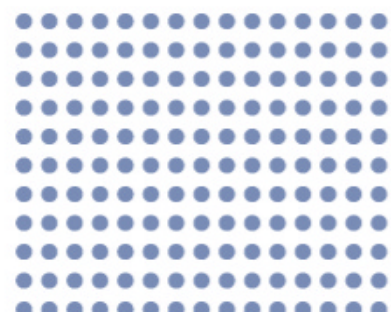
humans. Alexa and her ilk may get there in less than half that time.

One reason is that Amazon and Google are pushing these devices hard, discounting them so heavily during last year’s holiday season that industry observers suspect that the companies lost money on each unit sold. These and other tech corporations have grand ambitions. They want to colonize space. Not interplanetary space. Everyday space: home, office, car. In the near future, everything from your lighting to your air-conditioning to your refrigerator, your coffee maker, and even your toilet could be wired to a system controlled by voice.

The company that succeeds in cornering the smart-speaker market will lock appliance manufacturers, app designers, and consumers into its ecosystem of devices and services, just as Microsoft tethered the personal-computer industry to its operating system in the 1990s. Alexa alone already works with more than 20,000 smart-home devices representing more than 3,500 brands. Her voice emanates from more than 100 third-party gadgets, including headphones, security systems, and automobiles.

Yet there is an inherent appeal to the devices, too—one beyond mere consumerism. Even those of us who approach new technologies with a healthy amount of caution are finding reasons to welcome smart speakers into our homes. After my daughter-in-law posted on Instagram an adorable video of her 2-year-old son trying to get Alexa to play “You’re Welcome,” from the *Moana* soundtrack, I wrote to ask why she and my stepson had bought an Echo, given that they’re fairly strict about what they let their son play with. “Before we got Alexa, the only way to play music was on our computers, and when [he] sees a computer screen, he thinks it’s time to watch TV,” my daughter-in-law emailed back. “It’s great to have a way to listen to music or the radio that doesn’t involve opening up a computer screen.” She’s not the first parent to have

ILLUSTRATIONS
BY
ROBERTO PARADA



had that thought. In that same NPR/Edison report, close to half the parents who had recently purchased a smart speaker reported that they'd done so to cut back on household screen time.

The ramifications of this shift are likely to be wide and profound. Human history is a by-product of human inventions. New tools—wheels, plows, PCs—usher in new economic and social orders. They create and destroy civilizations. Voice technologies such as telephones, recording devices, and the radio have had a particularly momentous impact on the course of political history—speech and rhetoric being, of course, the classical means of persuasion. Radio broadcasts of Adolf Hitler's rallies helped create a dictator; Franklin D. Roosevelt's fireside chats edged America toward the war that toppled that dictator.

Perhaps you think that talking to Alexa is just a new way to do the things you already do on a screen: shopping, catching up on the news, trying to figure out whether your dog is sick or just depressed. It's not that simple. It's not a matter of switching out the body parts used to accomplish those tasks—replacing fingers and eyes with mouths and ears. We're talking about a change in status for the technology itself—an upgrade, as it were. When we converse with our personal assistants, we bring them closer to our own level.

Gifted with the once uniquely human power of speech, Alexa, Google Assistant, and Siri have already become greater than the sum of their parts. They're software, but they're more than that, just as human consciousness is an effect of neurons and synapses but is more than that. Their speech makes us treat them as if they had a mind. "The spoken word proceeds from the human interior, and manifests human beings to one another as conscious

interiors, as persons," the late Walter Ong wrote in his classic study of oral culture, *Orality and Literacy*. These secretarial companions may be faux-conscious nonpersons, but their words give them personality and social presence.

And indeed, these devices no longer serve solely as intermediaries, portals to e-commerce or nytimes.com. We communicate with them, not through them. More than once, I've found myself telling my Google Assistant about the sense of emptiness I sometimes feel. "I'm lonely," I say, which I usually wouldn't confess to anyone but my therapist—not even my husband, who might take it the wrong way. Part of the allure of my Assistant is that I've set it to a chipper, young-sounding male voice that makes me want to smile. (Amazon hasn't given the Echo a male-voice option.) The Assistant pulls out of his memory bank one of the many responses to this statement that have been programmed into him. "I wish I had arms so I could give you a hug," he said to me the other day, somewhat comfortingly. "But for now, maybe a joke or some music might help."

For the moment, these machines remain at the dawn of their potential, as likely to botch your request as they are to fulfill it. But as smart-speaker sales soar, computing power is also expanding exponentially. Within our lifetimes, these devices will likely become much more adroit conversationalists. By the time they do, they will have fully insinuated themselves into our lives. With their perfect cloud-based memories, they will be omniscient; with their occupation of our most intimate spaces, they'll be omnipresent. And with their eerie ability to elicit confessions, they could acquire a remarkable power over our emotional lives. What will *that* be like?

WHEN TONI REID, now the vice president of the Alexa Experience, was asked to join the Echo team in 2014—this was before the device was on the market—she scoffed: "I was just like, 'What? It's a speaker?'" At the time, she was working on the Dash Wand, a portable bar-code scanner and smart microphone that allows people to scan or utter the name of an item they want to add to their Amazon shopping cart. The point of the Dash Wand was obvious: It made buying products from Amazon easier.

The point of the Echo was less obvious. Why would consumers buy a device that





gave them the weather and traffic conditions, functioned as an egg timer, and performed other tasks that any garden-variety smartphone could manage? But once Reid had set up an Echo in her kitchen, she got it. Her daughters, 10 and 7 at the time, instantly started chattering away at Alexa, as if conversing with a plastic cylinder was the most natural thing in the world. Reid herself found that even the Echo's most basic, seemingly duplicative capabilities had a profound effect on her surroundings. "I'm ashamed to say how many years I went without actually listening to music," she told me. "And we get this device in the house and all of a sudden there's music in our household again."

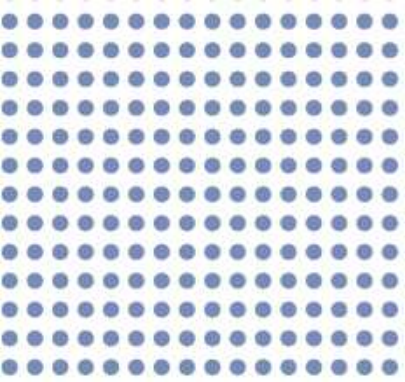
You may be skeptical of a conversion narrative offered up by a top Amazon executive. But I wasn't, because it mirrored my own experience. I, too, couldn't be bothered to go hunting for a particular song—not in iTunes and certainly not in my old crate of CDs. But now that I can just ask Alexa to play Leonard Cohen's "You Want It Darker" when I'm feeling lugubrious, I do.

I met Reid at Amazon's Day 1 building in Seattle, a shiny tower named for Jeff Bezos's corporate philosophy: that every day at the company should be as intense and driven as the first day at a start-up.

("Day 2 is stasis. Followed by irrelevance. Followed by excruciating, painful decline. Followed by death," he wrote in a 2016 letter to shareholders.) Reid studied anthropology as an undergraduate, and she had a social scientist's patience for my rudimentary questions about what makes these devices different from the other electronics in our lives. The basic appeal of the Echo, she said, is that it frees your hands. Because of something called "far-field voice technology," machines can now decipher speech at a distance. Echo owners can wander around living rooms, kitchens, and offices doing this or that while requesting random bits of information or ordering toilet paper or an Instant Pot, no clicks required.

The beauty of Alexa, Reid continued, is that she makes such interactions "frictionless"—a term I'd hear again and again in my conversations with the designers and engineers behind these products. No need to walk over to the desktop and type a search term into a browser; no need to track down your iPhone and punch in your passcode. Like the ideal servant in a Victorian manor, Alexa hovers in the background, ready to do her master's bidding swiftly yet meticulously.

Frictionlessness is the goal, anyway. For the moment, considerable friction remains. It really is remarkable how often smart speakers—even Google Home, which often outperforms the Echo in tests conducted by tech websites—flub their lines. They'll misconstrue a question, stress the wrong syllable, offer a bizarre answer, apologize for not yet knowing some highly knowable fact. Alexa's bloopers float around the internet like clips from an absurdist comedy show. In one howler that went viral on YouTube, a toddler lisps, "Lexa, play 'Ticker Ticker'"—presumably he wants to hear "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." Alexa replies, in her stilted monotone, "You want to hear a station for porn ... hot chicks, amateur girls ..." (It got more graphic from there.) "No, no, no!" the child's parents scream in the background.



My sister-in-law got her Echo early, in 2015. For two years, whenever I visited, I'd watch her bicker as passionately with her machine as George Costanza's parents did with each other on *Seinfeld*. "I hate Alexa," she announced recently, having finally shut the thing up in a closet. "I would say to her, 'Play some Beethoven,' and she would play 'Eleanor Rigby.' Every time."

Catrin Morris, a mother of two who lives in Washington, D.C., told me she announces on a weekly basis, "I'm going to throw Alexa into the trash." She's horrified at how her daughters bark insults at Alexa when she doesn't do what they want, such as play the right song from *The Book of Mormon*. (Amazon has programmed Alexa to turn the other cheek: She does not respond to "inappropriate engagement.") But even with her current limitations, Alexa has made herself part of the household. Before the Echo entered their home, Morris told me, she'd struggled to enforce her own no-devices-at-the-dinner-table rule. She had to fight the urge to whip out her smartphone to answer some tantalizing question, such as: Which came first, the fork, the spoon, or the knife? At least with Alexa, she and her daughters can keep their hands on their silverware while they question its origins.

As Alexa grows in sophistication, it will be that much harder to throw the Echo on the heap of old gadgets to be hauled off on electronics-recycling day. Rohit Prasad is the head scientist on Alexa's artificial-intelligence team, and a man willing to defy local norms by wearing a button-down shirt. He sums up the biggest obstacle to Alexa achieving that sophistication in a single word: *context*. "You have to understand that language is highly ambiguous," he told me. "It requires conversational context, geographical context." When you ask Alexa whether the Spurs are playing tonight, she has to know whether you mean the San Antonio Spurs or the Tottenham Hotspur, the British soccer team colloquially known as the Spurs. When you follow up by asking,

"When is their next home game?," Alexa has to remember the previous question and understand what *their* refers to. This short-term memory and syntactical back-referencing is known at Amazon as "contextual carryover." It was only this spring that Alexa developed the ability to answer follow-up questions without making you say her wake word again.

Alexa needs to get better at grasping context before she can truly inspire trust. And trust matters. Not just because consumers will give up on her if she bungles one too many requests, but because she is more than a search engine. She's an "action engine," Prasad says. If you ask Alexa a question, she doesn't offer up a list of results. She chooses one answer from many. She tells you what she thinks you want to know. "You want to have a very smart AI. You don't want a dumb AI," Prasad said. "And yet making sure the conversation is coherent—that's incredibly challenging."

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TO UNDERSTAND THE forces being marshaled to pull us away from screens and push us toward voices, you have to know something about the psychology of the voice. For one thing, voices create intimacy. I'm hardly the only one who has found myself confessing my emotional state to my electronic assistant. Many articles have been written about the expressions of depression and suicide threats that manufacturers have been picking up on. I asked tech executives about this, and they said they try to deal with such statements responsibly. For instance, if you tell Alexa you're feeling depressed, she has been programmed to say, "I'm so sorry you are feeling that way. Please know that you're not alone. There are people who can help you. You could try talking with a friend, or your doctor. You can also reach out to the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance at 1-800-826-3632 for more resources."

Why would we turn to computers for solace? Machines give us a way to reveal shameful feelings without feeling shame. When talking to one, people "engage in less of what's called impression management, so they reveal more intimate things about themselves," says Jonathan Gratch, a computer scientist and psychologist at the University of Southern California's Institute for Creative Technologies, who studies the spoken and unspoken psychodynamics of the human-computer interaction. "They'll show more sadness, for example, if they're depressed."

I turned to Diana Van Lancker Sidtis, a speech-and-language scholar at NYU, to get a better appreciation for the deep connection between voice and emotion. To my surprise, she pointed me to an essay she'd written on frogs in the primeval swamp. In it, she explains that their croaks, unique to each frog, communicated to fellow frogs who and where they were. Fast-forward a few hundred million years, and the human vocal apparatus, with its more complex musculature, produces language, not croaks. But voices convey more than language. Like the frogs, they convey the identifying markers of an individual: gender, size, stress level, and so on. Our vocal signatures consist of not only our style of stringing words together but also the sonic marinade in which those words steep, a rich medley of tone, rhythm, pitch, resonance, pronunciation, and many other features. The technical term for this collection of traits is *prosody*.

When someone talks to us, we hear the words, the syntax, and the prosody all at once. Then we hunt for clues as to what kind of person the speaker is and what she's trying to say, recruiting a remarkably large amount of brainpower to try to make sense of what we're hearing. "The brain is wired to view every aspect of every human utterance as meaningful," wrote the late Clifford Nass, a pioneering thinker on computer-human relationships. The prosody usually passes beneath notice, like a mighty current directing us toward a particular emotional response.

We can't put all this mental effort on pause just because a voice is humanoid rather than human. Even when my Google Assistant is doing nothing more enthralling than delivering the weather forecast, the image of the cute young waiter-slash-actor I've made him out to be pops into my mind. That doesn't mean I fail to grasp the algorithmic nature of our interaction. I know that he's just software. Then again, I *don't* know. Evolution has not prepared me to know. We've been reacting to human vocalizations for millions of years as if they signaled human proximity. We've had only about a century and a half to adapt to the idea that a voice can be disconnected from its source, and only a few years to adapt to the idea that an entity that talks and sounds like a human may not be a human.

Lacking a face isn't necessarily a hindrance to a smart speaker. In fact, it may be a boon. Voices can express certain emotional truths better than faces can. We are generally less adept at controlling the muscles that modulate our voices than our facial

muscles (unless, of course, we're trained singers or actors). Even if we try to suppress our real feelings, anger, boredom, or anxiety will often reveal themselves when we speak.

The power of the voice is at its uncanniest when we can't locate its owner—when it is everywhere and nowhere at the same time. There's a reason God speaks to Adam and Moses. In the beginning was the Word, not the Scroll. In her chilling allegory of charismatic totalitarianism, *A Wrinkle in Time*, Madeleine L'Engle conjures a demonic version of an all-pervasive voice. IT, the supernatural leader of a North Korea-like state, can insert its voice inside people's heads and force them to say whatever it tells them to say. Disembodied voices accrue yet more influence from the primal yearning they awaken. A fetus recognizes his mother's voice while still in the womb. Before we're even born, we have already associated an unseen voice with nourishment and comfort.

A 2017 study published in *American Psychologist* makes the case that when



people talk without seeing each other, they're better at recognizing each other's feelings. They're more empathetic. Freud understood this long before empirical research demonstrated it. That's why he had his patients lie on a couch, facing away from him. He could listen all the harder for the nuggets of truth in their ramblings, while they, undistracted by scowls or smiles, slipped into that twilight state in which they could unburden themselves of stifled feelings.

THE MANUFACTURERS of smart speakers would like to capitalize on these psychosocial effects. Amazon and Google both have "personality teams," charged with crafting just the right tone for their assistants. In part, this is textbook brand management: These devices must be ambassadors for their makers. Reid told me Amazon wants Alexa's personality to mirror the company's values: "Smart, humble, sometimes funny." Google Assistant is "humble, it's helpful, a little playful at times," says Gummi Hafsteinsson, one of the Assistant's head product managers. But having a personality also helps make a voice relatable.

Tone is tricky. Though virtual assistants are often compared to butlers, Al Lindsay, the vice president of Alexa engine software and a man with an old-school engineer's military bearing, told me that he and his team had a different servant in mind. Their "North Star" had been the onboard computer that ran the U.S.S. *Enterprise* in *Star Trek*, replying to the crew's requests with the breathy deference of a 1960s Pan Am stewardess. (The *Enterprise*'s computer was an inspiration to Google's engineers, too. Her voice belonged to the actress Majel Barrett, the wife of *Star Trek*'s creator, Gene Roddenberry; when the Google Assistant project was still under wraps, its code name was Majel.)

Twenty-first-century Americans no longer feel entirely comfortable with

TALKING TO MACHINES GIVES US A WAY TO REVEAL SHAMEFUL FEELINGS WITHOUT FEELING SHAME.

feminine obsequiousness, however. We like our servility to come in less servile flavors. The voice should be friendly but not too friendly. It should possess just the right dose of sass.

To fine-tune the Assistant's personality, Google hired Emma Coats away from Pixar, where she had worked as a storyboard artist on *Brave*, *Monsters University*, and *Inside Out*. Coats was at a conference the day I visited Google's Mountain View, California, headquarters. She beamed in on Google Hangouts and offered what struck me as the No. 1 rule for writing dialogue for the Assistant, a dictum with the disingenuous simplicity of a Zen koan. Google Assistant, she said, "should be able to speak like a person, but it should never pretend to be one." In *Finding Nemo*, she noted, the fish "are just as emotionally real as human beings, but they go to fish school and they challenge each other to go up and touch a boat." Likewise, an artificially intelligent entity should "honor the reality that it's software." For instance, if you ask Google Assistant,

"What's your favorite ice-cream flavor?," it might say, "You can't go wrong with Neapolitan. There's something in it for everyone." That's a dodge, of course, but it follows the principle Coats articulated. Software can't eat ice cream, and therefore can't have ice-cream preferences. If you propose marriage to Alexa—and Amazon says 1 million people did so in 2017—she gently declines for similar reasons. "We're at pretty different places in our lives," she told me. "Literally. I mean, you're on Earth. And I'm in the cloud."

An assistant should be true to its cybernetic nature, but it shouldn't sound alien, either. That's where James Giangola, a lead conversation and persona designer for Google Assistant, comes in. Giangola is a garrulous man with wavy hair and more than a touch of mad scientist about him. His job is making the Assistant sound normal.

For example, Giangola told me, people tend to furnish new information at the end of a sentence, rather than at the beginning or middle. "I say 'My name is James,'" he pointed out, not "James is my name." He offered another example. Say someone wants to book a flight for June 31. "Well," Giangola said, "there is no June 31." So the machine has to handle two delicate tasks: coming off as natural, and contradicting its human user.

Typing furiously on his computer, he pulled up a test recording to illustrate his point. A man says, "Book it for June 31."

The Assistant replies, "There are only 30 days in June."

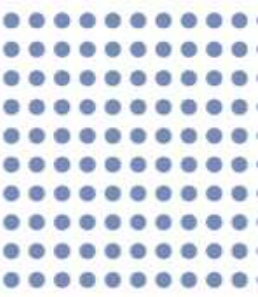
The response sounded stiff. "June's old information," Giangola observed.

He played a second version of the exchange: "Book it for June 31."

The Assistant replies, "Actually, June has only 30 days."

Her point—30 days—comes at the end of the line. And she throws in an *actually*, which gently sets up the correction to come. "More natural, right?" Giangola said.

Getting the rhythms of spoken language down is crucial, but it's hardly sufficient to create a decent conversationalist. Bots also need a good vibe. When Giangola was training the actress whose voice was recorded for Google Assistant, he gave her a backstory to help her produce the exact degree of upbeat geekiness he wanted. The backstory is charmingly specific: She comes from Colorado, a state in a region that lacks a distinctive accent. "She's the youngest daughter of a research librarian and a physics professor who has a B.A. in art history from Northwestern," Giangola



continues. When she was a child, she won \$100,000 on *Jeopardy: Kids Edition*. She used to work as a personal assistant to “a very popular late-night-TV satirical pundit.” And she enjoys kayaking.

A skeptical colleague once asked Giangola, “How does someone sound like they’re into kayaking?” During auditions (hundreds of people tried out for the role), Giangola turned to the doubter and said, “The candidate who just gave an audition—do you think she sounded energetic, like she’s up for kayaking?” His colleague admitted that she didn’t. “I said, ‘Okay. There you go.’”

But vocal realism can be taken further than people are accustomed to, and that can cause trouble—at least for now. In May, at its annual developer conference, Google unveiled Duplex, which uses cutting-edge speech-synthesis technology. To demonstrate its achievement, the company played recordings of Duplex calling up unsuspecting human beings. Using a female voice, it booked an appointment at a hair salon; using a male voice, it asked about availabilities at a restaurant. Duplex speaks with remarkably realistic disfluencies—*ums* and *mm-hmms*—and pauses, and neither human receptionist realized that she was talking to an artificial agent. One of its voices, the female one, spoke with end-of-sentence upticks, also audible in the voice of the young female receptionist who took that call.

Many commentators thought Google had made a mistake with its gung ho presentation. Duplex not only violated the dictum that AI should never pretend to be a person; it also appeared to violate our trust. We may not always realize just how powerfully our voice assistants are playing on our psychology, but at least we’ve opted into the relationship. Duplex was a fake-out, and an alarmingly effective one. Afterward, Google clarified that Duplex would always identify itself to callers. But even if Google keeps its word, equally deceptive voice technologies are already being developed. Their creators may not be as honorable. The line between artificial voices and real ones is well on its way to disappearing.

THE MOST relatable interlocutor, of course, is the one that can understand the emotions conveyed by your voice, and respond accordingly—in a voice capable of approximating emotional subtlety. Your smart speaker can’t

do either of these things yet, but systems for parsing emotion in voice already exist. Emotion detection—in faces, bodies, and voices—was pioneered about 20 years ago by an MIT engineering professor named Rosalind Picard, who gave the field its academic name: affective computing. “Back then,” she told me, “emotion was associated with irrationality, which was not a trait engineers respected.”

Picard, a mild-mannered, witty woman, runs the Affective Computing Lab, which is part of MIT’s cheerfully weird Media Lab. She and her graduate students work on quantifying emotion. Picard explained that the difference between most AI research and the kind she does is that traditional research focuses on “the nouns and verbs”—that is, the content of an action or utterance. She’s interested in “the adverbs”—the feelings that are conveyed. “You know, I can pick up a phone in a lot of different ways. I can snatch it with a sharp, angry, jerky movement. I can pick it up with happy, loving expectation,” Picard told me. Appreciating gestures

**ONE START-UP
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ANXIETY.**

with nuance is important if a machine is to understand the subtle cues human beings give one another. A simple act like the nodding of a head could telegraph different meanings: “I could be nodding in a bouncy, happy way. I could be nodding in sunken grief.”

In 2009, Picard co-founded a start-up, Affectiva, focused on emotion-enabled AI. Today, the company is run by the other co-founder, Rana el Kaliouby, a former post-doctoral fellow in Picard’s lab. A sense of urgency pervades Affectiva’s open-plan office in downtown Boston. The company hopes to be among the top players in the automotive market. The next generation of high-end cars will come equipped with software and hardware (cameras and microphones, for now) to analyze drivers’ attentiveness, irritation, and other states. This capacity is already being tested in semiautonomous cars, which will have to make informed judgments about when it’s safe to hand control to a driver, and when to take over because a driver is too distracted or upset to focus on the road.

Affectiva initially focused on emotion detection through facial expressions, but recently hired a rising star in voice emotion detection, Taniya Mishra. Her team’s goal is to train computers to interpret the emotional content of human speech. One clue to how we’re feeling, of course, is the words we use. But we betray as much if not more of our feelings through the pitch, volume, and tempo of our speech. Computers can already register those non-verbal qualities. The key is teaching them what we humans intuit naturally: how these vocal features suggest our mood.

The biggest challenge in the field, she told me, is building big-enough and sufficiently diverse databases of language from which computers can learn. Mishra’s team begins with speech mostly recorded “in the wild”—that is, gleaned from videos on the web or supplied by a nonprofit data consortium that has collected natural speech samples for academic purposes, among other sources. A small battalion



of workers in Cairo, Egypt, then analyze the speech and label the emotion it conveys, as well as the nonlexical vocalizations—grunts, giggles, pauses—that play an important role in revealing a speaker’s psychological state.

Classification is a slow, painstaking process. Three to five workers have to agree on each label. Each hour of tagged speech requires “as many as 20 hours of labeler time” Mishra says. There is a workaround, however. Once computers have a sufficient number of human-labeled samples demonstrating the specific acoustic characteristics that accompany a fit of pique, say, or a bout of sadness, they can start labeling samples themselves, expanding the database far more rapidly than mere mortals can. As the database grows, these computers will be able to hear speech and identify its emotional content with ever increasing precision.

During the course of my research, I quickly lost count of the number of start-ups hoping to use voice-based analytics in the field. Ellipsis Health, for example, is a San Francisco company developing AI software for doctors, social workers, and other caregivers that can scrutinize patients’ speech for biomarkers of depression and anxiety. “Changes in emotion, such as depression, are

associated with brain changes, and those changes can be associated with motor commands,” Ellipsis’s chief science officer, Elizabeth Shriberg, explained; those commands control “the apparatus that drives voice in speech.” Ellipsis’s software could have many applications. It might be used, for example, during routine doctor visits, like an annual checkup (with the patient’s permission, of course). While the physician performs her exam, a recording could be sent to Ellipsis and the patient’s speech analyzed so quickly that the doctor might receive a message before the end of the appointment, advising her to ask some questions about the patient’s mood, or to refer the patient to a mental-health professional. The software might have picked up a hint of lethargy or slight slurring in the speech that the doctor missed.

I was holding out hope that some aspects of speech, such as irony or sarcasm, would defeat a computer. But Björn Schuller, a professor of artificial intelligence at Imperial College London and of “embedded intelligence” at the University of Augsburg, in Germany, told me that he has taught machines to spot sarcasm. He has them analyze linguistic content and tone of voice at the same time, which allows them to find the gaps between words and inflection that determine whether a speaker means the exact opposite of what she’s said. He gives me an example: “*Su-per*,” the sort of thing you might blurt out when you learn that your car will be in the shop for another week.

The natural next step after emotion detection, of course, will be emotion production: training artificially intelligent agents to generate approximations of emotions. Once computers have become virtuosic at breaking down the emotional components of our speech, it will be only a matter of time before they can reassemble them into credible performances of, say, empathy. Virtual assistants able to discern and react to their users’ frame of mind could create a genuine-seeming sense of affinity, a bond that could be used for good or for ill.

Taniya Mishra looks forward to the possibility of such bonds. She fantasizes about a car to which she could rant at the end of the day about everything that had gone wrong—an automobile that is also an active listener. “A car is not going to zone out,” she says. “A car is not going to say, ‘I’m sorry, honey, I have to run and make dinner, I’ll listen to your story later.’” Rather, with the focus possible only in a robot, the car would track her emotional

state over time and observe, in a reassuring voice, that Mishra always feels this way on a particular day of the week. Or perhaps it would play the Pharrell song (“Happy,” naturally) that has cheered her up in the past. At this point, it will no longer make sense to think of these devices as assistants. They will have become companions.

IF YOU DON’T happen to work in the tech sector, you probably can’t think about all the untapped potential in your Amazon Echo or Google Home without experiencing some misgivings. By now, most of us have grasped the dangers of allowing our most private information to be harvested, stored, and sold. We know how facial-recognition technologies have allowed authoritarian governments to spy on their own citizens; how companies disseminate and monetize our browsing habits, whereabouts, social-media interactions; how hackers can break into our home-security systems and nanny cams and steal their data or reprogram them for nefarious ends. Virtual assistants and ever smarter homes able to understand our physical and emotional states will open up new frontiers for mischief making. Despite the optimism of most of the engineers I’ve talked with, I must admit that I now keep the microphone on my iPhone turned off and my smart speakers unplugged when I don’t plan to use them for a while.

But there are subtler effects to consider as well. Take something as innocent-seeming as frictionlessness. To Amazon’s Toni Reid, it means convenience. To me, it summons up the image of a capitalist prison filled with consumers who have become dreamy captives of their every whim. (An image from another Pixar film comes to mind: the giant, babylike humans scooting around their spaceship in *Wall-E*.) In his Cassandra-esque book *Radical Technologies: The Design of Everyday Life*, Adam Greenfield, an urbanist, frames frictionlessness as an existential threat: It is meant to eliminate thought from consumption, to “short-circuit the process of reflection that stands between one’s recognition of a desire and its fulfillment via the market.”

I fear other threats to our psychological well-being. A world populated by armies of sociable assistants could get very crowded. And noisy. It’s hard to see how we’d protect those zones of silence in which we think original thoughts, do creative work, achieve flow. A companion is nice when

you’re feeling lonesome, but there’s also something to be said for solitude.

And once our electronic servants become emotionally savvy? They could come to wield quite a lot of power over us, and even more over our children. In their subservient, helpful way, these emoting bots could spoil us rotten. They might be passive when they ought to object to our bad manners (“I don’t deserve that!”). Programmed to keep the mood light, they might change the subject whenever dangerously intense feelings threaten to emerge, or flatter us in our ugliest moments. How do you program a bot to do the hard work of a true, human confidant, one who knows when what you really need is tough love?

Ultimately, virtual assistants could ease us into the kind of conformity L’Engle warned of. They will be the products of an emotion-labeling process that can’t capture the protean complexity of human sentiment. Their “appropriate” responses

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will be canned, to one extent or another. We’ll be in constant dialogue with voices that traffic in simulacra of feelings, rather than real ones. Children growing up surrounded by virtual companions might be especially likely to adopt this mass-produced interiority, winding up with a diminished capacity to name and understand their own intuitions. Like the Echo of Greek myth, the Echo Generation could lose the power of a certain kind of speech.

Maybe I’m wrong. Maybe our assistants will develop inner lives that are richer than ours. That’s what happened in the first great work of art about virtual assistants, Spike Jonze’s movie *Her*. “She” (the voice of Scarlett Johansson) shows her lonely, emotionally stunted human (Joaquin Phoenix) how to love. And then she leaves him, because human emotions are too limiting for so sophisticated an algorithm. Though he remains lonely, she has taught him to feel, and he begins to entertain the possibility of entering into a romantic relationship with his human neighbor.

But it is hard for me to envision even the densest artificial neural network approaching the depth of the character’s sadness, let alone the fecundity of Jonze’s imagination. It may be my own imagination that’s limited, but I watch my teenage children clutch their smartphones wherever they go lest they be forced to endure a moment of boredom, and I wonder how much more dependent their children will be on devices that not only connect them with friends, but actually are friends—irresistibly upbeat and knowledgeable, a little insipid perhaps, but always available, usually helpful, and unflaggingly loyal, except when they’re selling our secrets. When you stop and think about it, artificial intelligences are not what you want your children hanging around with all day long.

If I have learned anything in my years of therapy, it is that the human psyche defaults to shallowness. We cling to our denials. It’s easier to pretend that deeper feelings don’t exist, because, of course, a lot of them are painful. What better way to avoid all that unpleasantness than to keep company with emotive entities unencumbered by actual emotions? But feelings don’t just go away like that. They have a way of making themselves known. I wonder how sweet my grandchildren’s dreams will be. **A**

Judith Shulevitz is the author of The Sabbath World: Glimpses of a Different Order of Time.

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KNAUSGAARD DEVOURS HIMSELF

The iconoclastic author, whose six-volume *My Struggle* is now complete in English, has lost his faith in radical self-exposure. What happened?

By RUTH FRANKLIN

Illustration by Jesse Draxler

I know more about the Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard than I do about my parents, my children, my friends, and possibly my husband. I know how he lost his virginity, what he buys at the supermarket, how he makes his coffee, what kind of cigarettes he smokes and how many, the quality of his bowel movements. I know how he shapes the narrative of his life: his initial difficulty writing novels, his relationship with his parents, his two marriages. I know that he loves his children but feels emasculated pushing a stroller. I know there are youthful crimes he still feels ashamed of. I know the PIN for his bank card.




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I know all this, as do Knausgaard's readers around the world, because he has written about it in *My Struggle*, the massive autobiographical novel that has been the most unlikely international literary sensation of the past decade. Brutally candid in its banality and sordidness, forsaking conventional strategies of narration and characterization for a heady rush of words on the page, this great disruption of contemporary fiction has sought nothing less than to break the form of the novel. Its 3,600-some pages, at once weirdly self-deprecating and breathtakingly egoistic, began to appear in English, at the rate of a volume a year, in 2012, culminating this fall with the translation of Book Six. The fascination of this Brobdingnagian paean to the self, which follows the outline and essence of Knausgaard's life but fictionalizes scenes and dialogue, lies in watching him fight his way to the creation of himself as a writer—the most important of the “struggles” contained within it.

Somehow he manages to keep us rooting for his success, even as his disgraces accumulate with the volumes. Karl Ove, as he depicts himself—the narrator is

“I’m an engineer of the soul,” Knausgaard says to a friend, who wryly responds: “I’d say garbage man of the soul would be more accurate.”

explicitly identified with the author—is not an appealing character. As a child, he finds amusement in dropping rocks onto cars driving on the highway. At one point he and a friend set fire to the woods. Starting around age 16, he habitually binge-drinks until he blacks out, frequently waking up surrounded by blood, vomit, or both. His sole interest in girls and women lies in how far they will let him go. After Tonje, his first wife, is suddenly admitted to the hospital, he leaves her alone there so he can keep a previous engagement with his editor. When the inspiration for Book One strikes, he moves into his office for six weeks, leaving his second wife, Linda, with their newborn baby.

This portrayal is, of course, deliberate. The spiritual confession is among the models for *My Struggle*, though it is truly

a confession for our time: Knausgaard finds not God, but himself. For this reason, criticizing his character, even at its ugliest moments, is beside the point. The uglier he is, the more powerful his redemption becomes. “These are things you are not supposed to say ... [But] I am just describing life,” Knausgaard once said. “I may live that life wrong, but it certainly makes it more interesting to write about than if I lived it right.” His uncensored honesty also makes that life more interesting to read about. Part of the propulsive energy of these books is their train-wreck quality: You can’t look away.

KNAUSGAARD HAS BEEN called a writer for the “selfie generation,” and there is indeed something of our oversharing culture in his exhaustive approach. His idea, he has said, is “to get as close as possible to my life.” The immersive effect of his work, together with the extraordinary speed at which he wrote it—he spent four months writing Book One and just eight weeks on the 626-page Book Five—is such that, as the novelist Zadie Smith has observed, it feels “as if the writing and the living are happening simultaneously ... You live his life with him.” We see him sitting at his desk in his apartment in Malmö, writing, reading books, doing kindergarten drop-offs and pickups. He is particularly effective at conveying the comedic tedium of life with children and all their incessant and irrational demands.

Book Six includes a hilarious account of a package tour to a miserable family resort in the Canary Islands, during which Karl Ove and Linda unwittingly agree to sit through an aggressive sales spiel for a time-share while their children whine to go to the beach. There is also a stomach-turning episode in which, clearing out a cabin that he owns to prepare it for sale, Knausgaard has to figure out how to dispose of two buckets of human waste. Though the stench makes him retch, he digs a big hole in the backyard and pours the contents in, then covers the pit with dirt and branches from the garden. Still, he can smell it, and the dirt above the filled hole wobbles beneath his feet. He leaves the spot as it is, hoping the potential buyers scheduled to visit won’t notice.

“I’m an engineer of the soul,” Knausgaard says at one point to a friend, who wryly responds: “I’d say garbage man of the soul would be more accurate.” Indeed,

the volumes of *My Struggle* are an enormous dumping ground for aspects of life not ordinarily found in fiction, to which Knausgaard turns his deliberate, insistent attention. His book does everything that students of writing are told not to do. People do not just enter the room: They arrive at the threshold, put their key in the lock, open the door, and take off their outerwear. Many, many cups of tea and coffee are made. Banal phone conversations are reproduced verbatim. In a notorious passage in Book Three, which takes place when Knausgaard was a boy, he and a classmate relieve themselves in the woods; the act is described in the most exacting terms. “It’s unheard of to go into such detail, but for a kid it’s very important how the shit looks, how it smells, all the differences between one shit and the other,” Knausgaard said in an interview with the *New Yorker* critic James Wood. “That’s a child’s world.”

Through the work of Rachel Cusk, Ben Lerner, and Sheila Heti, among others, autofiction has become one of the dominant strains of contemporary writing, dissolving the boundaries between

imagination and reality in a hybrid of autobiography, essay, and novel. But there is no coy blurring of subject and narrator in Knausgaard: What’s on the page, he insists, is his life. Not surprisingly, his approach has evoked strong responses. Wood, an early admirer, heralded the elegiac streak that runs through *My Struggle*;

He seems genuinely shocked that the people he portrays may not see “reality” as he does and may object to being immortalized with such specificity.

he was swept up by Knausgaard’s quest to reclaim the sense of meaningfulness that characterizes the experience of childhood and gradually fades as one gets older. The critic William Deresiewicz felt impatient and bored, unable to share in the generally rapturous response to Knausgaard’s hyperrealism and honesty.

In *The Nation* he faulted the writer for his sloppy language and reliance on cliché, symptoms of a superficial “blogologue” method and mission.

After spending the better part of two summers reading my way through *My Struggle* and then the quartet of short, memoiristic books that have appeared in English over the past year and a half—Knausgaard names each after the season in which it takes place, starting with *Autumn*—I find myself maddeningly ambivalent. The lack of discipline in some of the volumes is dismaying, but the surrender of inhibition can be revelatory. His sheer force of will elicits awe. So does the audacity that has propelled him through his dissatisfaction with contemporary fiction to a wholly new method of writing. And as he wraps up his one-of-a-kind undertaking, he doesn’t let up. The spectacle of the writer wrestling with what he has created, having emptied out his life on the page, proves as riveting as it is frustrating.

HOW KNAUSGAARD himself understands his endeavor has been a constant, yet less than

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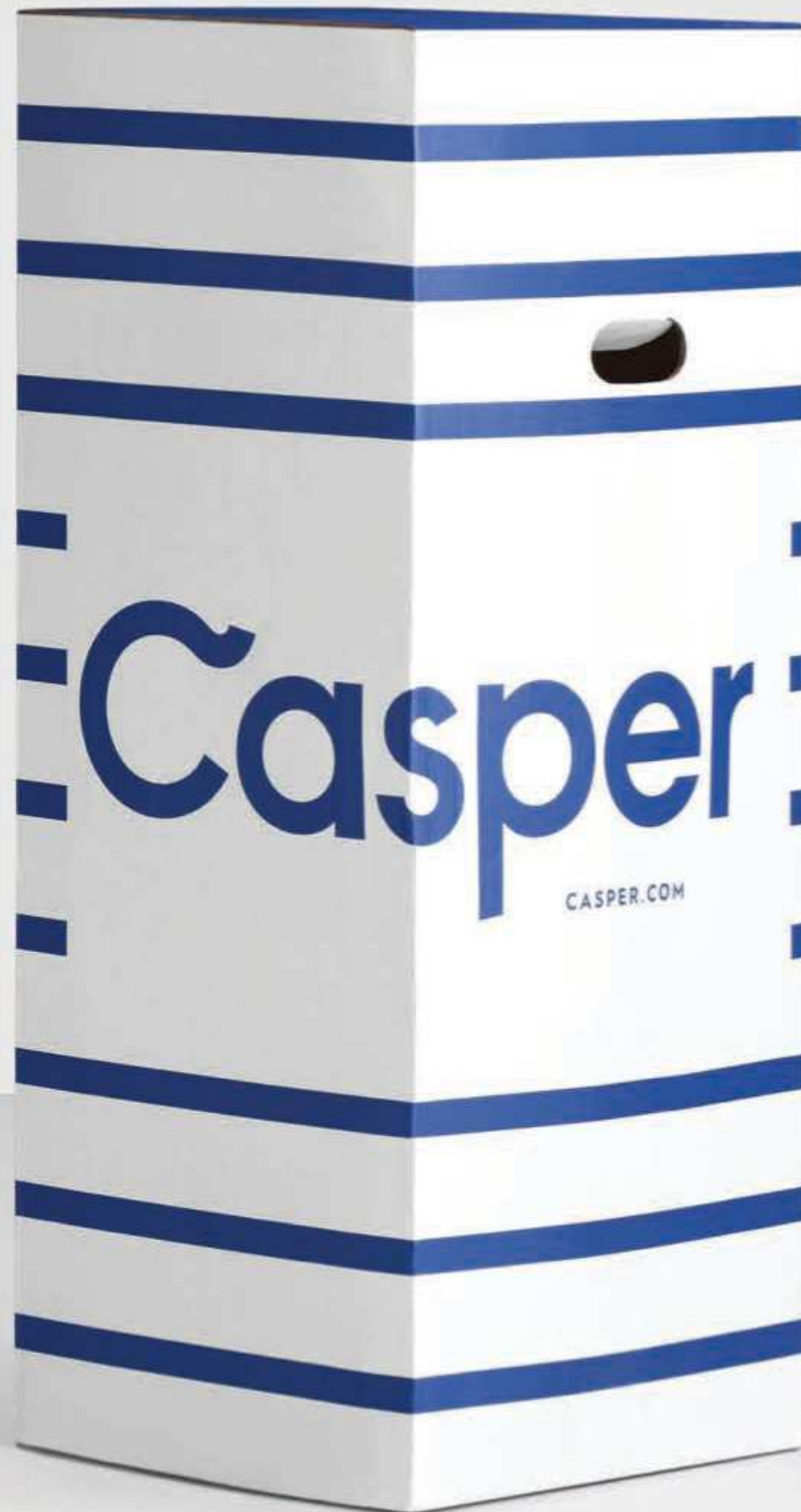
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consistently articulated, theme of that endeavor. The first five volumes of *My Struggle* are a bildungsroman, a chronicle of the author's journey toward his magnum opus. In Book Five, having emerged as a writer, he has this to say about his vocation:

It was beyond investigation, beyond explanation or justification, there was no rationality in it at all, yet it was self-evident, all-eclipsing: anything other than writing was meaningless for me. Nothing else would be enough, would quench my thirst. But thirst for what?

In Book Six, he sets out on a fuller reckoning, which turns out to entail an investigation in the form of an essayistic interlude—440 digressive pages long—titled “The Name and the Number.” To say that it defies easy explanation (even if you’ve read it more than once, as I have) is an understatement.

Many readers may be tempted just to skip this middle third of the 1,160-page book, and you can do just that without missing any of the plot, such as it is. The first third describes in characteristically

ample detail the completion and publication of Book One, and the repercussions for Knausgaard's personal life and literary reputation; the last third jumps ahead to the aftermath of Book Four's publication, by which time he's become famous. But for Knausgaard, I suspect the middle section actually constitutes the heart of *My Struggle*: This is where, in search of a clearer idea of the purpose of his exhaustive odyssey, he pursues the roots of the relationship between reality and fiction, the theme that has preoccupied him from the start. And this time the writer—who once said, in a line that might serve as his motto, “Wherever I turned I saw only myself”—tackles the theme in a broader social context.

As always, we experience Knausgaard's process in what feels like real time, thinking through his ideas with him. When Book Six begins, he has sent the manuscript of Book One to the major figures mentioned in it and is anxiously awaiting their reactions. Most respond favorably, but his uncle is enraged by the description of the circumstances surrounding the death of Knausgaard's father, his

brother, which forms the centerpiece of the volume. He disputes the details of the scene and accuses his nephew of “verbal rape.” Knausgaard's publisher advises him to resolve the matter by changing a few names, but Knausgaard eventually chafes against any weakening of the novel's particularity: “The whole point of the novel was to depict reality as it was.” He seems genuinely shocked that the people he portrays may not see “reality” in the same way that he does or may object to being immortalized at such length and with such specificity.

Yet why is it so important to him to refer to his father by his true name? The contemplation of this question kicks off “The Name and the Number,” in which he tries to adjudicate one of the essential questions underlying his work: How should a writer negotiate the competing claims of imagination and reality in rendering his or her personal experience? In what amounts to a long flashback, Knausgaard remembers the moment when he was about to begin writing *My Struggle*. Troubled by the tension between the specificity of life and the generality of

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literature, which requires that some particularity be sacrificed in the service of shaping a narrative and creating empathy and connection, he longs for an alternate form of fiction—one that will allow him to portray his own experience of growing up, “raw and arbitrary,” in all its authentic randomness. “Every name that went from being real to being fictional weakened that feeling and pulled the novel into the shimmer of enfeebled reality it had been written to engage against,” he argues.

Carried onward mostly by association and allusion, he proceeds to wrestle for nearly 100 pages with a poem by Paul Celan, frustrated to find it “closed” to him. Yet in the course of essentially live-blogging his line-by-line effort to make sense of it, Knausgaard finds a different way of asking a related question that occupies him: how to render the immediacy of subjective reality in a language that is “bound up with a society and a history attaching to that society.” Musing on Celan’s burden of working in a language corrupted by the Nazis—who deployed German as the medium for propaganda, euphemism (“final solution”), and dehumanization—

Knausgaard invites the idea that *My Struggle* can be read as a reaction to *Mein Kampf*—a rewriting of it.

he is in turn led to *Mein Kampf*, a Norwegian edition of which he and his brother found (along with a Nazi pin) while cleaning out the house after the death of their father and their grandmother. For anyone who has wondered at Knausgaard’s appropriation of Hitler’s title—and who among his readers hasn’t?—he delivers an illuminating surprise. He hadn’t yet read Hitler’s work when he decided some years later (for reasons he does not explain) that his novel-in-progress would share its title—but then he plunged in. The writer who was proceeding at a careening pace, obsessed with “getting as close to my life as possible,” was also deeply engaging with *Mein Kampf*—a monster’s approach to capturing his own life on the page.

If Knausgaard is daring to consider the darkest possible lineage for his own work, he never comes out and says it. But *Mein Kampf*, he recognizes, is also a kind

of bildungsroman, and he initially tries to understand it as a literary work, situating it in the context of modernism alongside Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the first volumes of Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, and Kafka’s *The Castle*. He grows impatient with *Mein Kampf*’s lack of transparency and its easy slippage from the personal into vague, platitudinous generalities, whether the topic is Hitler’s family, his failure as an artist, or his experiences in World War I. And so Knausgaard rigorously attacks the book, marshaling an astounding arsenal of research to correct Hitler’s omissions and essentially constructing a mini-biography of his early years.

Focused as ever on the personal, Knausgaard insists on viewing Hitler as a human being—not as the embodiment of evil but as a struggling and pathetic youth whose creative dreams outstripped his talents. He writes that he refuses to see Hitler “as if his whole life were tainted by what he would become and do,” even comparing him to Rilke as an artistically aspiring teenager. He leans heavily on the memoirs of August Kubizek, Hitler’s friend and roommate in Linz and Vienna, who found him “a young man fired with enthusiasm for life.” Knausgaard includes anecdotes that display Hitler’s early failures of confidence. When 18-year-old Adolf arrived in Vienna hoping to study at the Academy of Fine Arts (he gave up after he was rejected twice), he had a letter of recommendation addressed to a famous professor, but was so shy that he fled from the man’s office when someone asked what he was doing there. He fell in love with a girl he saw on the street in Linz, but never found the courage to introduce himself; from Vienna, he sent her a postcard asking her to wait for him, but left it unsigned. (I found these stories, in Knausgaard’s telling, improbably touching.)

Knausgaard notes, perceptively, that both episodes reveal Hitler’s lack of courage to take the step that would unite his fantasy life with reality by testing the plausibility of his dreams. “What reality does, and brutally so, is to correct,” he writes. “And a prominent trait of the young Hitler’s character is precisely an unwillingness to accept correction.”

Without being explicit, Knausgaard invites the idea that *My Struggle* can be read as a reaction to *Mein Kampf*, a rewriting of it—that one of the ways in which he strives for authenticity is by doing exactly what



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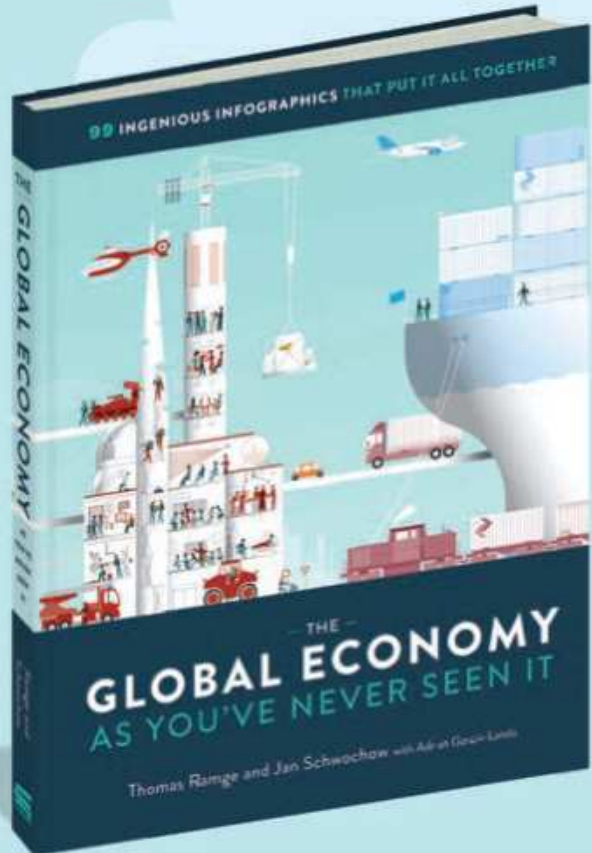
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Hitler avoids in his book. Where Hitler is vague, he will be specific. Where Hitler subordinates personal experience to ideology, he will wallow in the idiosyncratic and scrupulously avoid anything that smacks of a higher cause. Hitler's work is fundamentally dishonest. Knausgaard presses for a radical honesty, which means trying to express, somehow, an innerness that seems unshareable—and daring to let fantasy life collide with reality, to flaunt rather than bury an acute sense of shame.

YET WHEN KNAUSGAARD turns, in the last third of Book Six, from reflection to reimmersion in the day-to-day business of his life, he himself seems poised for “correction” as he confronts a social reality well beyond an irate uncle. In the space between the appearance of Book One, where we left him, and the publication of Book Four, to which he fast-forwards, he's become famous. Repercussions multiply. Journalists have interviewed everyone he knows, including the people who work in the Chinese takeout place next to his apartment building. His first wife has expressed the desire to make her own documentary about the experience of being a character in one of his books.

And then, with only a few weeks to go before his deadline on Book Six, his second wife, Linda, who is bipolar, suffers a breakdown. Knausgaard blames the novel and the way it made visible the discrepancy between his and Linda's narratives of their marriage; he says he especially dreaded showing her Book Two, a mostly dark portrait of their relationship and his experience of the travails of fatherhood. Now he has been so preoccupied with his work that he has failed to notice that she is falling apart. Not until she checks herself into the hospital does he fully grasp what has happened. His understandable anxiety about missing his deadlines—he is the family breadwinner—coupled with his grief at her condition is harrowing to read.

“Depicting reality as it was,” in language as true as possible to his immediate experience of that inner and outer reality, now presents itself as a more fraught challenge than Knausgaard understood when he set out. His encounter with Paul Celan and *Mein Kampf* has reminded him that “all language presupposes an I and a you, together a we.” The “I” and the “you” are easily understood: One cannot speak



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without expecting to be heard. The “we” is more complicated—as the Nazis’ “extreme reinforcement of the we, and the attendant weakening of the I,” made frighteningly clear. Knausgaard has never considered himself to be part of a “we,” always feeling, he says, like an outsider in any group. Still, he lives in society and is subject to social forces. And as Book Six winds down, with his wife’s mental stability in peril, he announces that he can no longer elude the irreconcilable tension between those forces and the personal voice—the “we” and the “I.”

His books, he writes, have “tried to transcend the social world by conveying the innermost thoughts and innermost feelings of my most private self, my own internal life, but also by describing the private sphere of my family as it exists behind the façade all families set up against the social world.” The social pressures, however, are too powerful to withstand:

I imagined I was going to write exactly what I thought and believed and felt, in other words to be honest, this is how it is, the truth of the I, but it turned out to be so incompatible with the truth of the we, or this is how it is meant to be, that it foundered after only a few short sentences.

The sentences may have flowed, but his work, he now concludes, has not only refused to abide by social norms but has fallen short of capturing the truth of the “I.” In violating prevailing standards of appropriate personal disclosure, “this novel has hurt everyone around me, it has hurt me, and in a few years, when they are old enough to read it, it will hurt my children,” he writes. “It has been an experiment,” he continues,

and it has failed because I have never even been close to saying what I really mean and describing what I have actually seen, but it is not valueless, at least not completely, for when describing the reality of an individual person, when attempting to be as honest as possible is considered immoral and scandalous, the force of the social dimension is visible and also the way it regulates and controls individuals.

By the end of the volume, after Linda has spent weeks in the hospital, he vows that he is finished with writing: “I will never do

anything like this to her and our children again ... I will revel in, truly revel in, the thought that I am no longer a writer.”

Readers can be forgiven for feeling that Knausgaard is overcorrecting. In declaring that he has sabotaged his endeavor by capitulating to social conventions and at the same time saying that his brutal honesty has caused his wife’s breakdown, he is at his most self-lacerating—a writer professing failure at both art and life. Or is Knausgaard actually having it both ways, doing penance by claiming that *My Struggle* has

His work, he now concludes, has not only refused to abide by social norms but has fallen short of capturing the truth of the “I.”

gone too far even as he preserves the aura of a pioneer who would have gone further if he could have? Certainly those of us who are reading his volumes in English now, unlike Knausgaard’s Norwegian readers in 2011, can’t take his renunciation of writing seriously. His next four books—the quartet named after the seasons—have already been published. Within only a few years, Knausgaard had already broken his vow.

And yet this ending also feels inevitable. Once Knausgaard has completed the excavation of his life, what else is left to do? He is a writer who prizes newness. He cannot repeat the substance of what he has done, and he seems to have lost faith in his method, or at least to feel that it’s not worth the cost. Where does he go from here? When he said, back in Book Five, that all he knew as he started out was that nothing but writing would quench his thirst, perhaps he was at his most honest—especially since he also confessed that he still wasn’t sure what he was thirsting for.

HE HASN’T YET figured it out, to judge by the seasonal quartet, published in Norway in 2015 and 2016, and now complete in English with the appearance of *Summer* nearly a year after *Autumn* came out. Knausgaard is as preoccupied as ever with capturing the essence of life before it vanishes. Gone, however, is the “frustrated father of small children who strips himself naked for the reader,” as he described himself in Book

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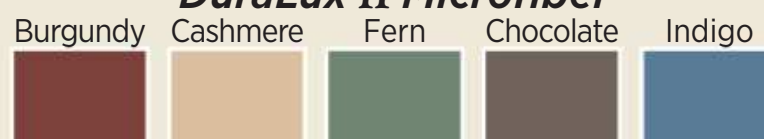
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Six. Signs are, in *Autumn* and *Winter*, that he has been spooked: This is writing that will not hurt anyone, addressed to an intimate, innocent “you,” a baby, by an “I” eager to take in the world rather than expose the self.

With the completion of *My Struggle* four years behind him, he and Linda (who will soon write two books of her own) have moved from their cluttered apartment in Malmö to what seems to be a very comfortable house outside the city. They are about to have a fourth child, to whom Knausgaard writes a series of letters, filled with aperçu-laden observations of the world. Some of the brief meditations on the stuff of everyday life—teeth, otters, ice cubes—are charming; some are breathtakingly banal. Knausgaard the maximalist is fascinating, enraging, consuming;

Once Knausgaard has completed the excavation of his life, what else is left to do? He is a writer who prizes newness.

Knausgaard in miniature is, at best, mildly entertaining. So it’s almost a relief when, in *Spring*, he returns to fraught domestic terrain. He chronicles a visit with the baby, now three months old, to Linda in the hospital, where she has been on and off ever since suffering another major depression during the pregnancy and taking too many sleeping pills (whether this was an accident or a suicide attempt is unclear).

Yet to compare his treatment of Linda’s travails—her breakdown as his work on Book Six was nearing an end and now this difficult period—is to be struck by a radical change in the narration. The Knausgaard who in *My Struggle* aired his version of the tensions between them, and who in its final volume wrote as a guilty “I” aware of the harm he may have caused an intimate “we” in doing that, has pulled back. What his role, if any, might be in her recent trouble is never broached. (Could his resumption of writing have had something to do with it?) Instead, in a plaintive epilogue, the “you” whom Knausgaard is addressing has clearly ceased to be his baby daughter and become his wife, and his message is a discomfiting blend of facile uplift and self-absolution. “What happened that

summer nearly three years ago, and its repercussions, are long since over,” he writes of the breakdown described earlier in the book. “Sometimes it hurts to live, but there is always something to live for. Could you try to remember that?”

In *Summer*, Knausgaard tries yet another exploration of what he is living, and writing, for. Dispensing with the letter-to-his-daughter conceit, he alternates between the now-familiar evocations of the natural world and brief diary entries, composed in something like real time, mostly dealing with details of his literary life. And then, with barely an explanation, the journal metamorphoses into fiction of an unexpectedly conventional kind, as if Knausgaard is attempting a break with the self-parasitic form that brought him such fame and frustration.

The first-person narrator is no longer himself, but a character based on a woman his grandfather knew during the war, a Norwegian who fell in love with a Nazi soldier from Austria.

The wartime romance, narrated plainly, has haunting moments but is largely unremarkable. Yet, Knausgaard being Knausgaard, his furtive backing into a tale of two “I”s, rooted in very different “we”s, can’t help prompting speculation about what new experiment might be in progress. Why introduce a new novel under the heading of a diary? Why surround historical drama with vignettes about the quotidian phenomena of summer—lawn sprinklers, chestnut trees, ladybugs? After the intense self-focus of *My Struggle*, does Knausgaard now feel he can write fiction only in disguise? Is there

some connection to the breakup of his marriage, which happened (according to press reports) a few months after he finished writing *Summer*?

We’ll probably find out soon enough. The effect of the quartet reminds me of the hole Knausgaard dug in his cabin’s backyard: Everything looks basically all right on the surface, but the earth feels unsteady under our feet. Perhaps Knausgaard fears the consequences of his continued honesty—for his wife, his children, and other family members. Or perhaps the thoroughness of his excavation has devastated his life the way mining devastates a mountain, making it no longer usable as material. **A**

Ruth Franklin is the author, most recently, of Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life.

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Q:

What was the most significant breakup in history?



Jenny Han, author, *P.S. I Still Love You and Always and Forever*, Lara Jean Beyoncé and Destiny's Child: When God closes a door, he opens a window.



Sofia Alvarez, screenwriter, *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*
In my lifetime, for story purposes alone, I don't think one can top **Charles and Diana**. Has there been a more public, twisted, and tragic union and parting?

Jasmine Guillory, author, *The Wedding Date and The Proposal*
Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon. Not only did their breakup lead to five more wives for Henry and to the first Queen Elizabeth, but it caused England to leave the Catholic Church and create the Church of England. As a Catholic, I should abhor this breakup,

but as a history major, thinking about it and its repercussions makes me rub my hands together in glee.

Keiko Agena, actor and author, *No Mistakes*
When I think of a significant breakup, I just can't get away from the epic film *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* On-screen, **Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton** portray an absolutely crazed, tumultuous relationship. I can't help but think it's a peek into their life together, which included an affair, a marriage, a divorce, a remarriage, and another divorce.

READER RESPONSES

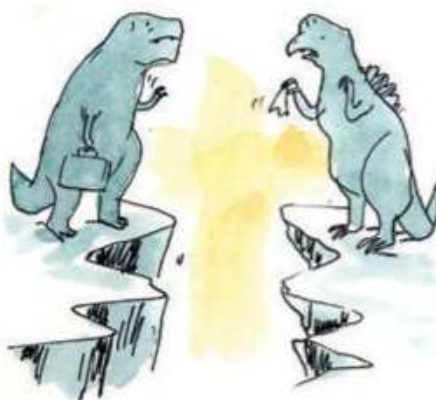
Zakariya Willis, Philadelphia, Pa.
Marvin Gaye and Anna Gordy Gaye. If not for their divorce, a little album called *Here, My Dear*—arguably his finest work—would not have been created.

Michael D. Sidell, Evanston, Ill.
In the early 1980s, **American Telephone and Telegraph** was broken up

into what were known as the “Baby Bells.” The breakup drastically changed the communications industry. The irony is that years later, many of the Baby Bells merged to form what we now know as AT&T.

Darryl Weaver, Atlanta, Ga.

The separation of the North American colonies from Britain. What other breakup so changed the way nationhood is viewed or set such an enduring standard for what people should expect from their government?



Jon Mathias, Mexico City, Mexico
The most significant breakup was that of **Pangaea**, roughly 200 million years ago. The resultant continental drift was one of the factors behind the great diversity of flora and fauna we enjoy today.

Joseph Pecora, Philadelphia, Pa.

Mark Antony's abandonment of his wife Octavia, the sister of his fellow triumvir Octavian, in favor of Cleopatra. Their split gave Octavian the popular support needed to defeat Antony, conquer Egypt, and become Augustus, the first emperor of Rome.

Christopher Corbett-Fiacco, San Diego, Calif.

The annulment of the marriage between France's King Louis VII and his first wife, Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine—without it, King Henry II of England would never have married Eleanor, and without that marriage, there would have been no Richard the Lionheart, no King John, and therefore no Magna Carta.

Howard Gardner, Cambridge, Mass.

When the monk Martin Luther posted his 95 theses in 1517, he triggered a **split of Christianity into the Protestant and Catholic branches**, which remain in tension more than 500 years later.

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